

Eleven Deadly Sins by JackDecatur

Series: [Eleven Deadly Sins \[1\]](#)

Category: Stranger Things (TV 2016)

Genre: F/M, Gen

Language: English

Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Karen Wheeler, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Michael Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Original Characters, Sam Owens, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

Relationships: Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jim "Chief" Hopper & Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers/Nancy Wheeler, Maxine "Max" Mayfield/Lucas Sinclair

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Summary:

Eleven was just one of, well, eleven test subjects. We know a lot about Eleven, and a bit about Eight, but what about the rest? What happened to them? Are any of them still alive? And, if so, what are they doing? It would be naive to believe that they would forget about what was done to them. It would be even more foolish to believe that the US Government would simply forget about a decades-long and incredibly expensive project to develop psychic warriors.

Time passes, but not all wounds heal. As Shakespeare said, "Scars remind us that the past was real."

Season 2 spoilers. Only rated Teen for strong language and violence.

Nothing sexual.

UPDATE! I've been going back over the beginning chapters (oh boy, they were not the best...) and making a lot of edits. As of 9/21, chapters 1 -6 have been greatly improved. Fixing mistakes, better formatting, fixing the tense, plugging holes in the story, etc. I'll be reviewing the next few chapters soon. If you feel like re-reading this story, do so in another week or two. It'll be better!!!

1. Out of the Furnace and Into the Fire

Author's Note:

Chapter 1: Out of the Furnace and Into the Fire

Summary for the Chapter:

The two men were greeted by a pool of red, radiating outward from a body in the middle of the entrance hall. The form was mangled and ripped apart as if a pack of wild animals, perhaps wolves, had been feasting upon it.

Notes for the Chapter:

Updated 9/18/18!

*In the beginning, there was only One,
His job was scary and not very fun,
He had to kill 'til the Cold War was won,
But then he refused, and then there was none.*

There was no hesitation in his steps as he walked briskly towards the entranceway. No attention was paid to the commotion that surrounded him: The trucks being unloaded, the dozens of civilian and military personnel scurrying around like frightened mice, the heated conversations taking place over radio. He didn't have time to ruminate on the scene. A job had to be done and there wasn't much time to do it.

As the man approached the doors he took note of the soldiers flanking it on either side, guns held at the ready. They were young and appeared exceedingly anxious.

Good, the man thought to himself. *They should be.*

There was another person standing near the door as well, waiting to be admitted. He was definitely not a soldier. That was obvious based on his appearance and dress: Middle-aged, perilously thin, unkempt hair, wrinkled grey suit with thick-rimmed, black glasses.

Must be another scientist. Of course he is. That's just what this place needs right now... the man thought to himself as he continued his approach.

He tried to avoid the scientist's gaze but was unsuccessful. Their eyes met and, at first, there was a mutual disregard until the scientist's eyes suddenly widened with recognition.

"Colonel Maddox!?" The man suddenly exclaimed. "How did you get here so quickly? I myself only just arrived. Our flight was held up because of those incompetent paper-pushers at Langley."

Colonel Maddox stared at the man with a blank expression, but he knew he had to say something to remove himself from the conversation and continue with the task at hand.

"This incident required my immediate attention. *My* flight was not delayed," he said curtly.

"Oh, of course not. I suppose one perk of being stationed on an airbase is the abundance of airplanes!" The scientist quipped. "You may not remember me, but we met at conference in DC last May. I'm Harold Cavanaugh. Dr. Harold Cavanaugh, to be precise. I'm the Assistant Director of Special Projects at the Department of Energy. It's a pleasure to see you again", he said, reaching out a hand to the Colonel.

Dr. Cavanaugh's amicable smile was not reciprocated by the stoic military man, whose expression remained devoid of any emotion. The Colonel's arm remained frozen at his side.

"I attend many conferences, Dr. Cavanaugh. And I meet many gentlemen in white lab coats," he said at last. "I can't be expected to remember all of them."

"Well, uhh, of course not," the doctor said awkwardly as he pulled

his hand back. “Hmph, well not the time to chit-chat anyway. I suppose we should probably head inside, yes?”

“Agreed,” the Colonel replied coolly.

“Sir, I just need to see your identification”, one of the guards at the entrance said as he gestured at the Colonel.

The Colonel’s icy blue eyes flickered briefly, appearing even brighter than before. “Identification? You want my identification, is that correct?”

“Y-yes, sir”, the soldier replied nervously. “Everyone has to present their ID card before we can grant them access to the facility.”

The officer’s stare continued unabated. “Do you know who I am, Private?”

“Y-yes, sir. Colonel Maddox, s-sir,” the young man replied through a stutter.

“So, if you know who I am, then why, may I ask, do you need to SEE MY IDENTIFICATION!?” the Colonel yelled, causing the scientist to jump and both guards to tense up.

“Uhh, well... I mean, you’re right, sir! Understood, sir! I-I’ll just buzz you both in,” the guard quickly replied as he pressed the call button on the wall.

“Smart decision,” the Colonel stated, flatly, as the doors slowly opened. Those doors, he noticed, were covered in a spider web of cracks. He gestured to Dr. Cavanaugh to lead the way, and the doctor did so, albeit slowly and cautiously.

Blood.

There was so much blood.

The two men were greeted by a pool of red, radiating outward from a body in the middle of the entrance hall. The form was mangled and ripped apart as if a pack of wild animals, perhaps wolves, had been feasting upon it.

No, not wolves, Maddox thought to himself. *Something much more... voracious.*

Dr. Cavanaugh rushed toward the body, stopping just behind another man who was taking pictures at all angles. "My God, what happened to him!?"

"Careful, Doctor. Asking questions like that may lead to some... uncomfortable answers." Maddox replied. He couldn't resist stopping briefly to study the macabre spectacle.

"I-I was informed there were casualties, but I didn't expect anything like this..." the doctor said as he gazed down at the body. Seeing the corpse and the copious amount of blood surrounding it was causing his own blood to hurriedly flee from his face.

"Well Doctor, there he is: Casualty number one," the Colonel stated. "I expect you'll encounter many more today. Now then, I have important business to attend to. Enjoy your stay in Hawkins, Dr. Harold Cavanaugh."

"I don't think I will... I suppose I'll be seeing you again very shortly Colonel." There was no reply. "Colonel?" Dr. Cavanaugh asked again as turned his head to where the Colonel was just standing. There was only empty space. The hallway doors were wide open, leading to the interior of the facility.

He seemed much friendlier the first time we met, Harold thought to himself before his attention returned to the body sprawled on the floor.

"Do you know who he is? Well, was?" he asked the man taking a seemingly endless number of pictures.

"Yea, he had ID in his wallet," the photographer replied, snapping another shot of the bloodied corpse. "His name is Bob. Bob... something."

"Bob something," Dr. Cavanaugh repeated. "What a way to die."

Colonel Maddox found himself in front of an open door, deep within the confines of the lab. The maze of hallways and doorways failed to deter his progress. He knew what door he needed to find. It was at the end of a long, dimly lit hallway, not far from a row of three steel doors. Those doors were presently secured shut and, hopefully, would never be opened again.

Maddox heard voices from inside the room. He heard laughter. His anger swelled. As he passed over the threshold he saw several uniformed men sitting in chairs, their feet resting on desks.

“Are you all enjoying yourselves today?” He asked sarcastically.

Four heads immediately whipped around, eyes bulging out of their skulls. In a flash they were on their feet, spines straight as a board, left arm by their sides as the right rose to form a perfect salute.

“Colonel Maddox, sir! I-we didn’t expect you to arrive today,” the man in front said almost too loudly.

“And yet, here I am,” the Colonel replied coldly.

“Sir, I apologize for the unprofessional conduct. I will ensure that...”

“I don’t have time for apologies,” Maddox interrupted. “Where are the files on Project Vertumnus? I want every document, every computer drive, everything single thing in this lab to be collected immediately.”

“Sir, that’s already been done. Everything is right here,” the soldier said, looking relieved. He pointed to the side of the room where a pile of boxes was stacked. Eleven boxes, to be exact. “That’s everything, sir. Well, almost everything...”

“What do you mean almost everything?” Once again, the pupils of the Colonel’s bright eyes seemed to glow with anger.

“Well, uhh.. sir, the older ‘Phase One’ files were already sent to be,

uhh, archived,” the soldier replied as he stumbled over his words. “That was before the, uhh, attack, I mean, the, uhm, incident, sir.” The young man had difficulty meeting the Colonel’s chilling gaze as he finished speaking.

“Understood,” Maddox said, apparently not too annoyed by the news. “I want all of these boxes prepared for immediate transport.”

“Yes, sir. We’ll have them brought outside right away,” the soldier said as he began to signal the others.

The tiniest, almost imperceptible flicker of a smile flashed on the Colonel’s face as he replied. “Outside? No. New orders from State are for all remaining Project Vertumnus files to be destroyed immediately. I will be escorting you, along with all Project materials, to the incinerator room.”

Maddox waited for a reply but none was provided. The four soldiers in the room appeared too shocked to say anything or move a muscle.

“Let me say that again,” the Colonel began in louder voice. “I order you to bring these boxes to the incinerator room for immediate destruction. Do you understand me? I won’t ask you a third time,” he stated, glaring at each of the men individually.

“Yes, sir!” they four soldiers exclaimed in unison as they rushed to place the heavy boxes on a nearby cart.

The nearby cargo elevator brought the group down slowly into the depths of the lab. Maddox stood in the back of the elevator, his eyes keenly focused on the boxes stacked in front of him. Two soldiers on either side of them, obeying his every command.

Almost there, he thought. Almost done.

A loud buzz sounded as the elevator arrived at Sub Basement Four. The metal doors opened slowly, revealing an eerily dark and expansive room. A giant furnace was noticeable against the far wall, the pilot light serving as a beacon to guide the party forward.

Col. Maddox stood stoic as he focused on the single flame. “Turn the furnace on and start burning the files.”

Burn them all.

Several floors above, an older man was in the midst of an escalating panic attack. He whirled around the much emptier room with his mouth agape.

The files! He screamed internally. All of the project files! WHERE ARE THEY!?

Boxes labeled “One”, “Three” and “Eight” were already smoldering in the furnace. The size and weight of them meant that only one could be loaded into the furnace at a time. It was an agonizingly slow process for Maddox, whose eyes never strayed from the center of the flames.

Box “Five” was next.

Yes, that’s it. Keep going, he silently pleaded.

Box “Two” followed.

The wail of the emergency alarm was jarring and it brought the Colonel back to his senses.

“Pay no attention to that,” he said quickly. “Continue with the mission.” The slightest hint of nervousness was barely perceptible in his voice during that final command.

The soldiers were sweating from the weight of the boxes and the intensity of the furnace’s heat.

“Yes, sir” they all said in unison once again.

Box “Six” burst into flames.

Faster. They need to go faster... Maddox thought as he shot a glance

backwards. Nothing yet.

Box “Ten” began to smoke moments after it entered the inferno.

The heavy, metal doors of the elevator clanged shut before it began to slowly ascend the shaft. Maddox knew that time was running out.

“You,” the Colonel snapped while pointing at one of the men. “Open the stairway door. The elevator just left and I’m already late for a meeting. I’ll be leaving momentarily.”

Box “Nine” was next.

“Yes, sir!” The soldier walked briskly to the door, typed in the passcode and pulled it open.

“Just leave it propped open. No need for me to enter the code again,” the Colonel said as his eyes returned to the fire.

You need to leave. You need to leave now, a voice in the back of his brain told him.

Box “Four” broke apart as it was tossed into the fire. Amidst the innumerable number of papers and folders, a picture of a young child was briefly visible before the flames turned it black.

Just another minute...

The elevator was gradually making the journey back down to them. Maddox could hear the low rumbling above him. It was time to leave but he wanted to see it all burn with his own eyes. He had to be certain that nothing would remain. Nothing left behind for them to use.

Box “Seven” fell into the furnace with a loud thud.

Time’s up, the voice called out once again. This time, he listened.

Col. Maddox bounded towards the exit, practically gliding through the propped open door as the soldiers grabbed ahold of the last box. He wanted to turn and witness the final moments but the buzz announcing the arrival of the elevator ended that thought. He heard

the frantic screams and yelling.

Too late. You're all too late! He silently screamed.

For the first time in a long time, a wide smile manifested itself on his visage. And then it vanished.

“Idiots! You idiots! What have you done!?” An older man, pure white hair, short and very overweight was the first one out of the elevator, practically falling over himself to get out. He was furious, livid, fuming. Yes, he was fuming. Fuming like the remnants of the boxes in the furnace, their precious contents quickly turning to ash.

The soldiers were confused, trembling and, most of all, terrified of the Military Police standing in front of them. The MPs had their rifles drawn and pointed directly at the soldier's chests.

“Col-Colonel Maddox, s-sir,” one of the soldiers finally stuttered. “He ordered us to destroy the project files. He said he had new orders...”

“New orders!? I give the orders. It's my FUCKING project!” the man screamed. He turned to one of the MPs quickly. “Lock down the entire facility, secure the perimeter. Find Maddox!”

“The stairs,” the soldier quickly added. “He went up the emergency stairwell.”

Two of the MPs bolted through the door left ajar and began climbing the stairs with the utmost urgency. Their loud footsteps echoed up the stairwell.

“Years of research destroyed,” the old man continued. “These were the only files... It was the only way to ensure absolute secrecy. And you morons. You, you BURNED THEM ALL!” His hands were shaking uncontrollably and his breathing was unsteady.

“N-not all of them, sir. There’s still one box left,” another soldier replied meekly.

“One box!? One box. One box after fifteen years of my life,” the despondent man replied, sighing deeply. “What subject number is it?”

“Uhh... It’s “Eleven”, sir. Just number “Eleven” is still intact.”

The older man’s eyes searched frantically around the area until they finally fell upon the lone box. It was on the ground, lying on its side and just to the right of the still blazing furnace. The soldiers were about to heave it into the flames when the elevator doors sprung open and chaos erupted, causing them to drop it at the very last second.

“Subject Eleven,” he mumbled quietly, almost to himself. “Well, now. Isn’t that lucky.”

The time on his watch read 14:32.

Damn it, he cursed, as he strode out the airport exit, squinting as the afternoon sun attacked his blue eyes. He wasn’t accustomed to being late.

Notes for the Chapter:

This is my first fan fic ever. I hope you'll enjoy it. I think this will be 11 (of course) chapters in total. I have the second one written already and I'll begin working on the next one soon. This chapter didn't involve any of the cast (well, except Bob - RIP) but it was necessary to set up my plot. The second chapter is longer. I'm still working out the later details but I think I know the general direction this story will take. Thank you for reading!

Updated 9/18/18

2. May I Have This Dance?

Summary for the Chapter:

'Eleven opened the door to the gymnasium and couldn't believe her eyes. There were balloons and sparkly decoration in every direction, enthralling her. And the people. Too many people, she thought, as she looked around the room nervously. There was only one person she cared about finding.'

Notes for the Chapter:

Updated 9/18/18!

*They all gathered 'round for the magic of Two,
You wouldn't believe the things she could do!
She'd enter your mind and erase it, it's true,
Slit her wrists with a comb, a fatal boo-boo.*

Darkness. Darkness as far as she could see in every direction. Her feet were, unsurprisingly, cold and wet as she walked forward. She thought that maybe it was just a dream. She couldn't recall going there purposefully. If it had been planned, she knew what - well, more like who - would've been present in the void. But he wasn't there. No one was.

And then suddenly, there was a light. A light flickering in the distance. It began to grow quickly as she moved toward it.

Fire. It's a fire, she realized.

She stopped moving, observing the roaring blaze in the center of giant, foreboding machine. The inviting glow of the fire juxtaposed by the shadowy black iron surrounding it.

Then a voice. She could hear a voice. It's volume steadily increasing.

“...of research destroyed.”

She spun around abruptly as figures began to materialize around her.

“BURNED THEM ALL!!”

The words were coming in too quickly, the figures still hazy and undefined.

“... fifteen years of my life.”

And then she heard her name.

“Eleven, sir. Just number Eleven...”

Her heart stopped beating and time seemed to stand still. Her screams echoed off of nothingness as the void imploded around her. The last thing she perceived was an elderly man in a white lab coat. The face was twisted in anger but his lips were beginning to curl into the slightest of smiles.

“Well, now. Isn’t that lucky.”

Chief Hopper’s eyes flew open in terror as cries filled the night and the cabin itself seemed to be shaking.

Jesus Christ, it IS shaking! He thought to himself as he bolted out of bed.

Hop didn’t bother reaching for the gun he always kept on the nightstand for easy access. He knew what was happening.

The journey to her room took mere seconds, but seemed like an eternity. The door was already flung open and shaking dangerously on its hinges. He rushed to the bed, which was currently floating about a foot off the ground, and brought the screaming girl into his

strong arms.

“Hey kid! Kid, it’s me. You’re home, you’re safe. It’s just another nightmare,” Hopper said quickly, trying to calm her down before more damage was done. He noticed the shards of broken glass on the floor next to the dresser.

Another fucking mirror... the chief grumbled to himself before shaking the anger from his thoughts.

No, that’s not important, he reminded himself. *Only she is.*

“Shh, it’s alright. I’m here.” The bed slowly sank back to the ground and landed with a gentle thud as Hopper began to weigh the pros and cons of bolting it to the floor.

Maybe the whole place would start floating away if I did that... he thought.

Eleven’s screams began to subside as soon as Hopper enveloped her in his arms, but her sobs remained. She could feel the stickiness of the blood on her upper lip and the hot tears streaming down her face.

Just a dream, she told herself. *Just another dream.*

After a few more sobs, her breathing began to even out and a new feeling of embarrassment washed over her.

“I’m sorry,” Eleven mumbled into his chest between hiccups. “I-I’m sorry.”

“There’s nothing to be sorry about, kid,” Hopper replied. “It’s gonna take some time, but these dreams will stop.”

“Promise?” she asked weakly, lifting her head slightly and meeting his worried eyes.

“I promise,” Hopper whispered back, as he placed a gentle kiss upon her head.

Eleven's room, once again, was a mess. Due to that, she spent yet another night bundled up on the couch. Hopper had returned to his bed after making sure she was calm again. Even though his snoring was thunderous through the open door, knowing that he was close by brought her immense comfort.

She had had that same nightmare again. It hadn't been the second time, it wasn't even the fifth time. The visions were always exactly the same, but she could never remember the dream while it was happening.

Confusion, curiosity, terror. Always the same, always in that order. The screams followed. Hopper came to her rescue. The events always played out the same.

Eleven glanced at the watch on her wrist. It was the one he gave her. Three-one-five.

No, three-fifteen, she corrected herself. The sun wouldn't rise for another few hours. Darkness continued to surround her.

Darkness. With the help of the small piece of material over her eyes, complete darkness.

This time, she entered the void willingly and for real.

A bedroom materialized in front of her. In actuality, it was just a bed but she knew it was in a bedroom. A mound of blankets, rising slowly up and down was in its center. Eleven walked slowly but purposefully over to the side of the bed and observed the sleeping figure.

Mike.

His face was barely visible between the pulled-up blankets and messy black hair covering his forehead. She dropped to her knees, resting her arms on the bed. His breathing was slow and steady and it calmed her.

She only felt at peace in his presence. Defeating physical monsters was one thing. Overcoming her personal demons was proving to be far more difficult.

“Mrmph,” Mike mumbled, shifting a bit in his sleep.

I hope your dreams are better than mine, Eleven thought.

Her face moved closer to his as she studied it further, even though she knew it by heart. Every inch and every freckle.

Pretty.

The minutes ticked by and Eleven could feel the waves exhaustion washing over her. She had to leave, but for the first time ever she wasn't sad. She was going to see him today.

Tonight. At the Snow Ball, she thought.

“Bye Mike,” Eleven whispered as she leaned in and kissed his ethereal lips as his figure dissipated from view.

Eleven removed her blindfold and wiped the blood from her nose as a radiant smile spread across her face.

There was always blood. But this time, there were no tears.

“I’m not going to say it again, Michael. Get up or you’ll be late for school!” Mrs. Wheeler yelled, impatiently, at the grumbling lump of her son. Her son who, at the moment, was attempting to hide under a small mountain of blankets.

“I’m up! I’m up! Stop screaming at me,” Michael Wheeler finally replied as he moved the blankets down a bit to expose his sleepy head.

“Good, it’s about time. Breakfast will be ready in a few minutes,” his mother replied before exiting his room.

Mike let out a heavy sigh as he remained in his bed.

Wait, he suddenly thought. It’s today. *The Snow Ball is today!!!*

Mike practically leapt out of his bed, suddenly very awake and feeling giddy and... and nervous. Very nervous. Painfully nervous.

He said she’s going. He wouldn’t lie about that, right? Mike thought, a slight twinge of anger building up as he thought about the Chief and what he already lied about.

Oh God, what if she DOES go!? What am I going to do then?

A few minutes of nervous pacing later, Mike proceeded to get ready for the day ahead. Shower, teeth, clothes an attempt to tame his messy hair. He stared at himself in the mirror for a moment, glancing at the comb in his hand.

I’ll try to make it look better tonight, he finally decided before placing the comb down.

Mike bounded down the stairs and raced to the dining room table where the rest of the family was already gathered. He couldn’t help but notice the grin on his sister’s face as she watched him take his seat. His face reddened slightly.

“So, Mike. Looking forward to the big dance tonight?” Nancy asked, still smiling.

He glared at her before responding. “Are you looking forward to passing out punch?”

“Actually, I am,” she replied happily. “I’ll get to see you and your friends all dressed up. Talking to girls.” She winked. “Dancing with girls,” she continued. Mike’s face reddened further. “Is there maybe a special someone you really want to see tonight?”

Nancy could tell that Mike was reaching his breaking point, but she couldn’t help herself.

Young love, she mused.

Nancy had been recruited by Hopper to find a dress for Eleven. She really hoped that the young girl would like the one she had found.

“Idontknowmaybe,” Mike said quickly and quietly, trying to avoid his Mother’s suddenly interested gaze.

Nancy just smirked at him. Having achieved her desired result of embarrassing Mike, she began to talk to her Mom about her dress and what she wanted to do with her hair later on. Mike couldn’t finish his food fast enough before sprinting away from them, muttering a barely audible goodbye.

The school day flew by in a blur. Mike didn’t take notes in any of his classes and barely spoke to anyone. He couldn’t even focus on what his friends were saying during lunch as he stared at his unappetizing bologna sandwich. His thoughts were elsewhere.

They don’t know El is going, he kept saying to himself.

He and Nancy knew. He thought maybe Jonathan. Probably Jonathan, actually.

Ugh, gross, Mike thought as he thought about why Jonathan may know.

Hopper had made it very clear that he didn’t want the news spread around too much.

“The more people who know, the more dangerous it is for her. And that’s IF she can go. No promises,” Hopper had told him.

“No promises,” Mike mumbled.

“What did you say?” Will asked. He was sitting next to Mike at the

table, eating quietly.

“Huh? Oh, nothing. Nothing.” Mike lied. He sighed heavily as he took another bite of processed lunch meat and soggy white bread.

Dustin and Lucas didn’t hear them. They were too busy bickering about something to do with aliens and astral projection. Max rolled her eyes in boredom.

No promises, he repeated, silently this time, as he signed once again.

I look like the biggest dweeb in the universe, Mike thought as he stared at his reflection in the mirror. His blue collared shirt and red tie were almost completely obscured by a sweater, the majority of which was hidden under a brown jacket.

His Mom, on the other hand, thought he looked positively adorable as she continued to snap candid pictures.

Mike gritted his teeth. *If El doesn’t show up tonight I’m just going to hurl myself off a bridge*. The thought of that caused him to crack a tiny smile. *But even if I did jump, El would be there to save me*, he mused.

His smile continued to grow as he sat in the backseat of his Mom’s car.

She always saves me.

It was foolish of me to come here, he thought to himself. He was taking a great risk for basically no reason. There was no valuable intel to

gather, no plans to thwart.

Voyeurism. That's all this is, he concluded as his gaze drifted around the room, settling on an older girl distributing punch. *Hey there, Nancy Wheeler. Lookin' good.*

One by one, Mike's friends abandoned him. Well, that was his interpretation of what was going on anyway. Lucas had asked Max to dance. *Wait, that's not completely true*, Mike thought. Max had asked a blubbering Lucas if he was trying to ask her to dance and he grinned like an idiot as they walked away.

I guess dancing is kind of the point of the Snow Ball, Mike postulated as Will and Dustin disappeared. Will was basically dragged onto the dance floor by Jennifer, while a newly confident Dustin made a beeline for Stacey.

Mike sighed as he slumped into a chair. *She should have been here by now*, he thought. *She's not coming.* His chest tightened up and he blinked his eyes quickly to hold back tears.

Well, shit.

Nancy had left the punch station. She seemed to have a destination in mind as she strode away briskly. He wandered over to the table, leaving the shadowy corner as his curiosity got the best of him.

It smells nice, he thought. His mouth was parched but he didn't reach for a cup. He averted his gaze and noticed a few girls staring at him before quickly turning their heads and giggling. *Damn it*, he thought

while struggling to suppress a smile. *Maybe I overdid it.*

Shiny black shoes, a crisp white shirt and checkered blue bow tie. His matching pale blue suit caused his radiant eyes to stand out even more than normal. His dirty-blond hair was perfectly quaffed and a white rose adorned his lapel.

It's the rose. The rose was too much.

One of the girls began walking toward him and his eyes danced over her svelte figure.

Stop that.

"Hi!" she said cheerily. "I'm Sarah. I haven't seen you around before. Do you go to school here?" She knew he didn't. Hawkins was a small town after all and she would have noticed him.

"Steven" he said matter-of-factly. "No, I'm from out of town. I'm just here to visit some family." He added, hoping that would be sufficient.

"Welcome to Hawkins!" she beamed at him. "So, Steve, would you like to dance..."

"Steven" he interrupted. "My name is Steven." His eyes narrowed and his expression darkened.

Sarah was briefly taken aback by the sudden coldness of his voice. "Oh, uh s-sorry. Steven."

Get ahold of yourself.

"No, I apologize," Steven said, his calm demeanor returning as quickly as it disappeared. "I never liked nicknames." He forced a smile. "I have to get going. I'm actually waiting to see someone but it was nice meeting you, Sarah. I hope you enjoy the rest of the... Ball."

Sarah felt a twinge of disappointment but maybe she'd bump into him again soon. "Oh, alright. It was nice meeting you too, *Steven*." She said, emphasizing the preferred name. With a final smirk she

turned on her heels and walked back to her group of friends. They demanded to know every detail.

His eyes followed her briefly before he began walking away in the opposite direction. Back into the shadows where he wouldn't be disturbed.

What could have been... he thought to himself as the door across from him opened.

And then he saw her.

Eleven opened the door to the gymnasium and couldn't believe her eyes. There were balloons and sparkly decoration in every direction, enthralling her. And the people. *Too many people*, she thought as she looked around the room nervously. There was only one person she cared about finding.

And then she saw him.

Another song ended and she still wasn't there. The Snow Ball continued on without her. It dragged on as he sat hunched over in an uncomfortable chair, picking at a thread on his stupid brown jacket.

A slower song started playing. He recognized it right away. It was "Every Breath You Take" by the Police. *It's kind of creepy, actually*, Mike pondered as he looked up toward the front doors.

And then he saw her.

Eleven. Eleven casually walking into a school dance. Cute little dress on, hair and makeup done. Steven's teeth were grinding.

Calm down.

His heart was racing and his hands were vibrating.

Patience.

She walked right up to Michael Wheeler - *gross, nerd, why?* - looking as happy as a... a... Steven's brain was failing him. He couldn't think straight. He watched as Mike and Eleven exchanged a few words.

"Oh h-hi Eleven. Gee golly wilikers you look p-prettier than m-mint condition Princess Leia action figure s-still in the b-box!" Steven was confident that he had performed a spot-on impression of Mike.

"Oh Mike, you're so romantic and brave and handsome. I'm just a sad little girl without a family. I don't know what dancing is because maybe I was stuck in a government lab being tortured my whole *fucking* life!" The pitch of his voice heightened to imitate hers.

Yep, that's it. That was totally what they said, Steven thought as his eyes burned a hole in them.

Mike and Eleven moved toward the middle of the gym and began to dance as the song progressed. *Oh, c'mon, really?*

'Every move you make,

Every vow you break,

Every smile you fake,

Every claim you stake,

I'll be watching you.'

Steven couldn't take much more of this infuriating display. He was about to leave when suddenly, it happened. He kissed her.

He kissed her!?

'I feel so cold and I long for your embrace

I keep crying baby, baby, please'

He had to get out of there. Practically blinded by rage, Steven stumbled toward the nearest door.

Closed. Screw it.

He moved forward determinedly. Luckily, he arrived just as another couple was coming in. He skirted past them and raced down the hallway and through the open front door. The cool night air was a welcome feeling. He was suffocating inside that hot gym filled with all those sweaty kids.

No, it's because of her. Him. Them.

His hands were on his knees as he bent over, breathing heavily, trying to regain control over his body.

"Hey, kid. You okay?"

His body straightened up instantly and he whirled toward the sound of the words. His eyes flashed mischievously as he realized who had addressed him.

"I'm fine, sir. Just needed some air. It's getting crazy in there," he pointed behind him towards the gym. "This dweeb Mike Wheeler started spazzing out at some strange girl and she ran off crying..."

Steven barely finished before Chief Hopper sprinted into the school, a woman chasing after him asking what had happened.

Fuck you, Mike.

A smile returned to Steven's face as he started humming along to the still audible music.

'Every single day, every word you say, every game you play, every night you stay'

"I'LL BE WATCHING YOOOUUUUU!" He crooned, before breaking into a fit of uncontrollable laughter.

Dr. Sam Owens was sitting in an office chair, his injured leg resting on a coffee table. It had healed fairly well, but it still hurt on cold days like today. He longed for his warm, comfortable couch. He did not want to be here.

The door across from him opened and a man stepped into the room. An older man. Pure white hair, short, obese. He knew him well.

"Dr. Owens," he said. "It's wonderful to see you again. There's so much to discuss."

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm writing faster than I thought, so here's Chapter 2!
Yes, the main characters have finally arrived and they'll be present for the rest of the story. Thank you for any feedback and I hope you enjoy the story!
There's plenty more excitement to come, I promise.

Oh, and I apologize for any errors. I've gone over this story twenty times, and I'm pretty sure it's clean.

Updated 9/18/18

3. First Impression

Summary for the Chapter:

El giggled as he took off again and she followed close behind. "Mike! Stop! Too fast," she said, laughing in between breaths. The sadness of the last two weeks disappeared as her heart swelled with relief and happiness.

He came to see me! she squealed internally.

Notes for the Chapter:

Updated 9/20/18! So many things needed to be fixed in these early chapters. Yeesh...

*A fiery tale, 'tis the fable of Three,
Manipulating fire was something to see,
They poked and they prodded until catastrophe,
She burned oh-so many, and died heatedly.*

It had snowed all day. The town of Hawkins was quickly enveloped in a cold, white blanket of new-fallen snow. Eleven was less than thrilled with this new development as she still harbored painful memories from the previous winter.

She had been so cold. So hungry. So sad. So alone.

When Eleven had first discovered the wooden box filled with food - including her favorite food of Eggo waffles - she was overcome with both joy and fear. However, her hunger greatly outweighed the fear she felt and, for the first time in a long time, she actually enjoyed what she consumed.

Now, over a year later, Eleven was sitting at a table in a quaint little cabin in the middle of the woods with the man who had provided that secret meal. The man who then gave her a home. Who fed her, clothed her, protected her and comforted her for an entire year.

But this was also the man who kept her locked in this tiny, wooden prison. The man who kept her hidden from the world and far away from her friends. The man who wouldn't tell her when she could leave or when she could live a normal life. The man who she was beginning to resent more and more each day.

I'm going to wring that kid's neck, Chief Hopper thought as he rushed into the school and down the hallway towards the gymnasium.

He could hear the music getting louder as he approached the doors to the large room.

"Hop, wait! Stop!" The woman behind him yelled. "What's wrong with you!? You can't just barge in there. You're the Chief of Police. How's that going to look?"

Reluctantly, Hopper stopped in his tracks and turned to Joyce Byers. "That kid said Mike yelled at El, that she ran off crying! You don't think I'm going to do anything about that!?" He was trying to speak in a low voice but it wasn't working.

"Does that really sound like something Michael Wheeler would do?" Joyce asked, sounding incredulous.

No, not at all, Hopper thought, momentarily frozen in thought. "Well, maybe not but that's not the point!"

"Then what is the point, Jim?" Joyce asked, grinning at him. She couldn't help but notice how cute he looked while playing the role of protective father instead of surely Police Chief. "How about we just take a quick peek inside, okay?"

"Fine," he replied. "But if anything, and I mean anything, happened in there I'm going to..."

The doors suddenly opened and a student appeared, seemingly

headed towards the bathroom away from them. Joyce gave Hop another playful smirk before they neared the entranceway. They immediately noticed the pretty decorations and the dozens of couples on the dance floor.

Hop's eyes darted back and forth until they finally landed on the person he was searching for inside.

"Oh, Hop," Joyce said, spotting them in the crowd at the same moment. "Look how happy she is. See? Nothing's wrong."

Hopper continued to stare at the couple. They were barely swaying, just slowly turning while the music played. Their foreheads were pressed together. Interestingly enough, his anger didn't seem to abate much after this sight.

I need to have another talk with that kid, Hop thought, as he noted Mike's hands clutching El's hips.

However, the Chief was relieved that the information he received was, indeed, incorrect. Michael Wheeler hadn't done anything wrong, just as Joyce predicted. But this brief feeling of relief was quickly replaced with fear and dread. Joyce noticed the change in his expression.

"What is it?" She asked him quietly.

"Isn't it a bit odd that some kid runs out of the school all angry and out of breath and then the first thing he says is that someone, no, not just someone, that Michael Wheeler was yelling at some 'strange' girl?" Hopper asked as he met Joyce's eyes. "The didn't even hesitate. Why would he lie like that? Unless..."

"Unless what?" Joyce asked, feeling her anxiety rise. She broke her stare with Hop and looked back through the glass, quickly searching for another kid. A young boy who happened to be her son.

"Unless, I don't know. Something doesn't feel right." Hopper was playing a dozen scenarios through his head. None of them made sense.

Just a prank? No, it's just too much of a coincidence, Hop said to

himself. *This is the first day she's been out. He knows something...*

"I need to get El out of here. Now."

The Snow Ball was all El had been looking forward to and Chief Jim Hopper had ruined it. Two weeks had passed since that night. Two more weeks without seeing her friends. Two more weeks without seeing Mike. Well, not in person anyway...

Eleven was spending more and more time in the void. In the morning before breakfast, during the day when Hopper was at work, after dinner in her room, before going to sleep. She needed to see him. It was the only thing keeping her sane.

There was, however, one positive change. Over the last two weeks, the intensity of her nightmares had, thankfully, decreased dramatically. Eleven still had disturbing dreams, visions and flashbacks, but that scene of fire and the old man whispering her name was beginning to fade away. She couldn't help but wonder what it all had meant.

"Hey, kid. Finish your dinner," Hopper said, interrupting her thoughts. She stared over at him, meeting his gaze. They hadn't spoken much over the last two weeks and that had been fine by her.

One minute she was the happiest person in the world, dancing with Mike, his hands holding her, their foreheads touching. And then in an instant she felt herself being pulled away by Nancy Wheeler, feeling confused and shattered as Mike lunged after her while protesting wildly.

"No," El replied fiercely, even though she was still hungry. Her stomach growled in protest to her statement.

"No, you won't finish your dinner? Is that it?" Hopper asked. "Fine." He stood up, grabbed her TV dinner, walked over to the trash can

and dumped it in without another word.

Eleven could've stopped him, of course. But she didn't care. She was too sad to care anymore.

I miss you so much...

"What are you talking about? What happened" Nancy asked Joyce, as they stood in the corner of the gymnasium. Joyce had convinced Hopper to remain outside the room and not cause a whole scene.

"There was this boy... he said things to Hop about Mike and El. We think he might know something about her." Joyce said, wondering if that made any sense.

"Look at them," Nancy replied quickly, pointing at Mike and El, who were now talking amicably with their friends. Dustin, Will, Lucas, and even Max, were clearly overjoyed that she had been able to come out and have fun with them.

"Look at how happy they are right now. You want to ruin that for them? After everything they've been through!?" Nancy, asked. Her eyes were pleading with Joyce to reconsider.

"You know I don't! It's just... Hop thinks it's too dangerous for her to stay any longer." Joyce didn't want to do this but she knew Hopper was not going to change his decision.

Nancy stared at her for a moment before looking back at the young kids. She hadn't seen a smile that wide on her brother's face since the night of Eleven's return, when she walked into the Byers house looking all punk-rock and deadly.

He really loves her, she thought.

Another slow song started playing and Eleven grabbed Mike's hand

and pulled him back onto the dance floor, to the complete shock of him and their friends. Mike looked like he was the luckiest boy on the face of the Earth.

“One more dance,” Nancy said, not even realizing the words escaped her lips.

“What?” Joyce replied, her eyes stayed fixated on her son Will. He was smiling and laughing with his friends. He looked so happy.

“Tell Hop, one more dance, and then I’ll do it. I’ll bring her out. I promise.” Nancy’s eyes were tearing up as she said those last two words. She walked away quickly before Joyce could reply.

“One more dance,” Joyce echoed. *And I don’t care what Hop has to say about that.*

Eleven was watching much less TV as she now preferred the quiet, serenity of her room. She passed the days reading and watching Mike from the darkness of the void. Sleepy Mike in the morning, studious Mike at school, silly Mike with their friends, sad Mike at night.

Lonely Mike, always.

She noticed that his eyes had less of a sparkle since the night of the Snow Ball, even though he seemed to understand better than her as to why she needed to leave, why she needed to stay hidden away.

He was furious at first, but when he heard the story about what happened, the color drained from his face. He didn’t know who Steven was. Neither did Dustin or Lucas or Will or Max or Nancy or Jonathan or even Steve Harrington. They had only learned his name after overhearing some girls talking about the stranger at the dance.

They all concluded that Steven definitely didn’t go to their school as no one had ever met him, or had even seen him, before. They

wondered how he knew who Mike was and, more importantly, what he knew about the ‘strange’ girl who was out in public for the first time in over a month.

So there El was, lying in her bed, wide awake, stuck in her cabin prison in the middle of the woods. It had been hours since she visited Mike during the regularly scheduled, nightly broadcast on his Supercom. Mike had told her all about his day, how he missed her, how he wanted to see her. That hadn’t made her feel much better.

El’s stomach grumbled. She knew that not finishing her dinner had been a mistake. With a heavy sigh, she swung her legs over the bed and quietly opened her bedroom door. Hopper was asleep and snoring loudly, as usual. He wasn’t going to wake up easily, especially after her nighttime screams had mostly ceased.

She was nearing the fridge when she heard her name being called.

“El!”

The hairs on the back of her neck and arms stood up. Her breathing stopped.

That voice...

“Hey, El!”

She spun around. The cabin was empty. Her heart began to race.

It’s coming from outside, she concluded.

El carefully moved toward the window. Her hand trembled as she reached for the curtain. Slowly, very slowly, she pulled it open just enough to peek outside.

“Mike!” she quietly shrieked, barely able to believe her eyes. There, outside in the snow in front of the cabin was none other than Mike Wheeler, bundled up in a heavy jacket, boots, gloves and hat. He was just standing there, a broad smile on his face as he called out to her again.

“El! It’s me, El. Come outside!” Mike said, waving invitingly to her.

El was shaking with anticipation as she struggled to throw on clothes, boots, her favorite jacket - one of Mike's that he had told Hopper to give her since he had so many - gloves and a pink hat with a white puffball on top that Mrs. Byers had made for her and that she loved very, very much.

With a flick of her head the locks on the door slid and clicked and the door sprung open. Without a second thought she bounded out the door, shutting it behind her a bit too loudly. But she didn't care.

Mike is here!

"Mike!" El gasped as the cold hit her face. "What are you doing here!? How did you find the cabin?" She racked her brain, trying to remember if she had told him where it was.

"I wanted to see you El. I missed you. You look so beautiful tonight. You always look beautiful," Mike replied and her heart melted. She forgot about her second question.

"C'mon El, let's go have some fun!" Mike exclaimed as he smiled that wide smile of his that made her heart flutter.

El ran down the steps towards him, hoping for a hug, but instead Mike started moving backwards. She stopped short of him, a pouty and confused expression on her face.

"You have to catch me first," Mike said, winking at her. El saw that his eyes had that sparkle in them again. They were practically glowing.

Mike started running away from the cabin before El could protest.

The tripwire! El thought, suddenly panicking. Luckily, Mike must have just missed it as he ran passed the trees it was tied between.

Good job with the trap, Hop... she said to herself sarcastically as she carefully stopped to step over it.

"El, come on. Hurry!" Mike said, yelling over his shoulder.

El giggled as he took off again and she followed close behind. "Mike!

Stop! Too fast,” she said, laughing in between breaths. The sadness of the last two weeks disappeared as her heart swelled with relief and happiness.

He came to see me! she squealed internally.

They reached a small clearing in the trees where the snow was still perfectly untouched. El stopped to catch her breath as Mike was still about ten feet in front of her.

“Do you know what a snow angel is?” Mike asked suddenly.

Snow angel? She thought, biting her lip.

She knew what an angel was from some stories she read and she definitely knew what snow was. “No,” she said, sounding disappointed. “I don’t.”

“That’s okay, El! I love teaching you new things,” Mike quickly replied. His smile growing even wider. “See, you lie down on your back in the snow, spread out your arms and legs and move them back and forth.” Mike mimicked the action as he spoke. “Then, when you get up you look down in the snow it looks like an angel. A snow angel! Get it!?”

El couldn’t believe the excitement in his voice and knew that she had to try to make a snow angel immediately because that was definitely the best and more important thing to do in the whole world at that moment. “Okay! Let me try!” She said, beaming.

El let herself fall onto the snow, laughing as she moved her arms back and forth, copying the motion that Mike had demonstrated.

“You’ve got it, El!” She heard Mike say. “You’re so amazing! How are you so perfect?” El immediately blushed and she hoped that the heat radiating from her face wouldn’t melt all the snow and ruin her angel. “Okay, now stand up!”

El got up and began to inspect her work. There was just enough moonlight streaming through the surrounding trees for her to observe the shape she had made in the snow. She gasped in awe.

"Mike! It's beautiful. I love it!" She exclaimed, completely entranced by her first snow angel.

I love you, too, Mike, she said to herself.

"Hmm," Mike mumbled, walking over to her side. "Something's not right."

El turned quickly and looked at him. She scrunched up her nose and looked back at the ground, confused by his words. "What do you mean?" She asked quizzically.

"Your impression in the snow. It doesn't look like an angel at all," he replied quickly and coldly while staring at her.

The happiness EL had been feeling disappeared instantly.

"W-what? D-did I do it w-wrong?" she quietly stammered, her words full of embarrassment and worry, her eyes getting misty. She looked up at Mike and realized something was horribly wrong.

The boy's expression was cold. It was cruel. It terrified her.

"It doesn't look like an angel," Mike said again, his eyes ablaze and piercing as he leaned in closer to her. "It looks just like you, Eleven. It looks like a monster."

The forest shook as the young girl's screams filled the cold night air.

*'Maybe the sun's light will be dim
And it won't matter anyhow
If morning's echo says we've sinned
It was what I wanted now
And if we're victims of the night
I won't be blinded by the light'*

“JUST CALL ME ANGEL OF THE MOORRRRRNIING”

(angel)

“JUST TOUCH MY CHEEK BEFORE YOU LEAVE ME, BAAAABYYYYY”

He danced around the room as he sang along energetically to the blaring music His hands were covered in fresh blood.

“JUST CALL ME ANGEL OF THE MOORRRRRNIING”

(angel)

“THEN SLOWLY TURN AWAAAYYY”

And even though it was a frigid winter night, he felt incredibly warm.

Notes for the Chapter:

Poor El. There's definitely something strange happening in Hawkins again and it looks like El's existence isn't as much of a secret as Hop had hoped it would be. There is a lot of back and forth in this chapter and that will continue to happen going forward. I hope it's not too confusing. I promise that I'm working hard to get everything tied together. Chapter 4 is done and I'm working on 5 now. I also just thought of the ending, so that's good! Thank you all for reading and for leaving nice comments.

Updated 9/20/18

4. Where There's a Will, There's a Way

Summary for the Chapter:

Jonathan's door was closed and Will could hear him snoring. He raced over to the front door and opened it, revealing a seemingly very out of breath Dustin on his front steps.

"Will!" Dustin shouted again. "It's El." Another breath "You gotta come..." More breathing. "You gotta come help!"

Notes for the Chapter:

The updates continue... Updated 9/20/18

*A tale of pain is the tale of Four,
She gave her all, but they wanted more,
A silvery blade was brought to implore,
Her blood bled bright on the bright white floor.*

It was 12:18am on Saturday, December 14th when everything went to Hell.

"JESUS CHRIST!" Hopper screamed as he was jarred awake by both the sound of thunderous crashing and the feeling of his bed literally shaking beneath him.

"Alright, this has gotta sto..." He could faintly hear a scream in the distance.

In the distance!?

Hopper didn't even bother checking El's room. He knew she wasn't in there. In a flash, he threw on a pair of pants, a jacket and boots and sprinted out the unlocked - he cursed in frustration - front door.

Hopper ran toward the sound of the screams. The ground was

shaking and the trees were swaying even though the air was still. He knew he had to get to her quickl...

BANG!

Hopper fell to the ground with a loud thud as the sound of a single gunshot echoed off the cabin.

It was 8:26 am on Saturday morning when Will Byers' eyes shot open and he gasped audibly. His heart was beating unnaturally fast and his body was covered in sweat. He had endured yet another dream where he was stuck in the Upside Down, being mercilessly hunted by the Mind Flayer.

He closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths as he tried to steady his heartbeat. It comforted Will knowing that he could take his time this morning. It was Saturday and he felt no reason to leave the warmth and safety of his bed anytime soon. That was until he heard the unmistakable sound of Dustin Henderson calling his name.

Will leapt from his bed and ran out into the hall. It didn't look like his mom was home.

Oh, working early, he remembered.

Jonathan's door was closed and Will could hear him snoring. He raced over to the front door and opened it, revealing a seemingly very out of breath Dustin on his front steps.

"Will!" Dustin shouted again. "It's El." Another breath "You gotta come..." More breathing. "You gotta come help!"

"What? What happened!?" Will cried as the panic he had already been feeling that morning grew even stronger.

"It's El. El's gone. Something happened at the cabin last night,"

Dustin replied quickly. "Everyone's going to look for her. You're with me."

"Wait, the other guys are already out looking? Why didn't anyone radio in?" Will asked, puzzled by the departure from standard operating procedures.

"Will, there's no time. Are you coming or not!?" Dustin asked, clearly frustrated but no longer breathing heavily at all.

"Wha..? Yea, yea of course I am. H-hold on." Will stammered as he ran back into his room. He quickly threw on some clothes and his winter jacket before running back into the living room.

I should tell Jonathan, he thought as he stared back down the hallway.

"Will, let's go! She could be anywhere!" Dustin snapped, still standing outside the front door.

I'll just leave a note, Will decided.

He hurriedly scribbled '*With Dustin, El is missing. Tell mom*' on a piece of paper on the dining room table. He then ran back to the still open door. "Okay, alright. I'm ready. Where to?"

Dustin smiled. "Let's go check Fort Byers and head out from there. Now that you're with me, I know we'll find her!"

Will smiled hesitantly as he took off running next to his old friend.

Fort Byers? *Dustin's acting kinda weird,* Will thought, as they disappeared into the woods.

Probably just because of El..

Jim Hopper could taste blood in his mouth as he moaned in agony on

the cold, hard ground.

The tripwire, he thought with a groan. *The stupid, fucking tripwire.*

He had fallen hard and he figured there must have been a sizeable rock under all that white, fluffy snow because his lip was cut open and his face hurt like Hell.

“Goddamn, stupid...” Hop muttered as he righted himself and continued his journey deeper into the woods.

The screams had ceased but it didn’t take much effort to find her. At first, the trees were simply bent outward a bit, but as Hopper reached the clearing what he saw was complete devastation. A body was lying at the center of it all.

Hopper hurried towards the unconscious figure. He couldn’t help but notice that every tree for at least 50 feet around the clearing had been completely knocked over or split in half.

“Son of a bitch,” he muttered. “El, El! Hey, kid, it’s me! Wake up!” Hop yelled as he lifted her light, limp body into his arms. He could tell she was still breathing.

“El!” He called out to the girl again but still didn’t receive a reply.

With a grunt, Hopper stood up with El in his arms and began to trudge his way back towards the cabin. He passed by the mangled remains of trees, hoping that no one else heard El’s cries.

How would I explain all of this? He thought to himself.

El whimpered in his arms, reminding him that there were more important things to worry about at that moment.

“I’m right here, kid. It was just another nightmare,” he said. Although this time, he wasn’t so sure. “It’s going to be alright. I promised you it would be? Remember?”

Hop continued to speak to her as the cabin came back into view. El still appeared to be unconscious but was shivering against his body.

This wasn't just a dream, Hop thought. Sleepwalking maybe? She put on a jacket and everything...

It didn't make sense to him. Hop looked down at the tiny girl again. Her hair was covered in snow.

Wish she had dreamt about putting on a damn hat too, he silently grumbled.

Hopper hurried up the cabin steps, opened the door and brought El to the couch.

"Let's get you warmed up, kid," he said as he went to get more blankets. "Then we'll figure all of this out."

After several minutes of non-stop moving, Will stopped to catch his breath. They had run the entire way to his forest sanctuary, Castle Byers. The snow hadn't made their trek any easier, although Dustin didn't seem winded at all. Will took note of that confusing fact but didn't bring it up.

A quick look inside the secluded fort confirmed that El was not there. The interior was even emptier than usual as Will had moved some of his things back to his room in preparation for winter.

"Well, she's not here. Where to now?" Will asked, still breathing heavily.

Dustin paced around a bit, seeming deep in thought. "Let's head that way," he finally said, pointing off into the deeper woods and beginning to walk off. "EL! HEY EL!" He yelled.

Will was walking several feet off to Dustin's right as he turned and looked closer at Dustin's head.

"Why don't you have your Supercom and headset?" Will asked

suddenly.

Dustin turned to him with an annoyed expression on his face. “Well, where’s your Supercom?” He replied.

“You were yelling at me to hurry up! I forget it,” Will replied. “I-I didn’t even tell Jonathan I was leaving. I just left a quick note.” Will was starting to really regret not waking up his older brother.

“Yea, well maybe I was in a hurry too!” Dustin countered. “Anyway, I... What was that!?” Dustin said quickly, snapping his head to the side.

Will didn’t think he had heard anything but he was primarily focused on Dustin’s puzzling behavior. Something about his friend just seemed off.

“It came from over there,” Dustin continued talking as he took off running once again. “Will! C’mon!”

Somewhat reluctantly, Will gave chase but was finding it difficult to keep up with his historically unathletic friend. Dustin slipped between some bushes and Will lost sight of him as he struggled to catch up.

“Will, there’s a path right through here. Hurry up!” He could hear Dustin saying.

Will started pushing his way through the bushes, trying to avoid prickles and shielding his eyes from the branches. He quickened his pace as he tried to end this annoying leg of the quest.

And then he was falling.

It was just before 1:00am when the fire Hopper restarted finally began producing some much needed heat. He had removed El’s cold

and wet winter clothes, laid her on the couch and covered her up in as many blankets as he could find. He then pulled the couch closer to the fire and sat down in front of it, staring at her pale face.

Hopper sighed as he placed a hand on her forehead.

Still cold, he thought.

“How about a story, kid?” He said, hoping that maybe she could still hear him somehow. He was feeling helpless, just like he felt when his daughter, Sara, was in the hospital, barely clinging to life. He blinked quickly to suppress a tear as he began to reminisce about his former life.

“Did I ever tell you that my daughter Sara hated Eggos?” Hop asked, not expecting a reply. “It’s true,” he continued, chuckling a bit. “She didn’t like their uhh texture. Loved pancakes though. My wife used to cook her pancakes every morning.”

The fire crackled and it briefly drew his attention away from the young girl.

“But she couldn’t have just any regular pancakes. Oh, no. She was stubborn. Just like you,” Hop said as he looked back at El. “She wanted ‘blueberry-Mickey Mouse-pancakes.’ Oh, Mickey Mouse is this uhh... cartoon character. You know, a mouse but with really big ears and stuff.” Hop’s hands went to his ears as if to emphasize the point but the girl’s eyes remained closed.

“So yea, she’d get these big blueberry pancakes with pancake ears and then drown them in syrup. She loved them...” he continued. The flames reflected in his watery eyes, causing them to glow.

Hopper sighed as he began to speak again. “But then she got sick and she had to start taking all this medicine and it made her feel really bad after eating. So then she couldn’t eat her ‘blueberry-Mickey Mouse-pancakes’ anymore. And that made her really sad. And that made me sad too. And angry.” A single tear escaped his eye.

Hop reached under the blanket and took one of El’s still cold hands into his own.

"I guess... I guess what I'm trying to say is that life isn't always fair. My little girl never did anything wrong and she was taken from me. You haven't done anything bad either but you're the one suffering just like her and that makes me even more angry and sad," Hopper said as he tried to choke back more tears. "I know you can't hear me, but I want to let you know that I love you and I won't let you be taken away from me too. Not tonight. Not ever."

Hopper thought he felt the tiniest squeeze of El's hand in his, but knew it was probably just his imagination. She still appeared to be fast asleep but he hoped she would wake up soon.

I love you too, El replied from somewhere in the darkness.

When Will finally stirred, he realized that he was lying on his back. He opened his eyes slowly and everything seemed blurry.

"Ughhh," the small boy moaned as he tried to sit up. His head was throbbing and his right ankle felt like it was on fire.

"Will? Earth to Will? Are you okay, buddy?" He heard Dustin ask. His hazy figure was standing over him.

"Wha-what just happened?" Will asked, trying to focus on his friend's face.

"You fell, Will. It was a pretty bad fall too. You were out cold for like twenty minutes," Dustin replied, as he watched Will bring a hand down to his right foot and tense up. "Aww, did you twist your ankle too?" Dustin asked.

Will was still in a daze but he was confused by how unconcerned Dustin sounded. When he finally tried to sit up a bit, he yelped in pain once he attempted to move his right foot.

Will grimaced as the pain shot through his body. "Oww, shit! Oww,

that really hurts. Dustin, help me...”

“Do you ever wonder why all these bad things keep happening to you?” Dustin interrupted.

Will’s focus on his injuries quickly subsided. “Wh-what? What did you just say?” He asked, his voice unsteady.

“Oh, I mean like how you were attacked last year by a bloodthirsty monster and trapped in an alternate dimension? Wait, my bad. Trapped in the Upside Down,” Dustin said, making air quotes with his fingers.

Will just stared at Dustin incredulously as he continued to speak.

“You almost died there. And even though you were miraculously saved, you never really recovered. Isn’t that right, Zombie Boy?” Dustin chuckled as he used one of Will’s unfortunate nicknames.

“Wh-who are you?” Will asked nervously while his body began to tremble in fear.

Dustin ignored Will’s question as he began walking back and forth in front of Will while continuing his speech. “Time goes by and you think maybe things will get better, right? WRONG! The Upside Down remembered you, didn’t it? It searched for you. So then you end up getting possessed by some otherworldly being which uses you as weapon against your own friends and family.”

Will scooted backwards on the ground until he felt his back hit solid earth and rock. He knew he should try to escape but there was no way he could with his injured ankle.

Think, Will. Think, he said to himself.

“How was that, by the way?” Dustin asked. “Being possessed, I mean. Say on a scale from one to eleven.” He then began to laugh. “Oh, c’mon Will. That was kinda funny, huh?”

Will tried to talk but he couldn’t form any words. Tears began streaming down his face.

Try to be brave.

“Alright, moving on. So, our boy wonder, Will Byers, somehow beats death a second time. He’s scarred, both physically and mentally, yet still breathing.” Dustin stopped walking and turned to look at the boy. “But just look at him now: Not even two months later and here he is stuck in the middle of the woods, freezing, with a concussion and a definitely sprained, possibly broken, ankle. Why is that, Will? Why, Will?”

Dustin’s tone darkened as his eyes lit up. “Tell me why, Will! TELL ME!”

“P-please, please s-stop. Please. I-I don’t k-know why,” Will quietly stammered, barely able to get the words out between his sobs.

Just leave me alone, his mind pleaded.

“Yes, you do, Will. We all know why,” Dustin said, as he crouched down in front of the trembling boy. “Say her name. Say her name, Will.”

“N-no. You’re wrong. S-she saved me,” Will replied, his voice barely audible.

She’s my friend. It wasn’t her fault, he told himself.

“Saved you!? She almost got you killed! Twice!” Dustin yelled, inching closer to Will. “She opened a gate to another dimension! She released the monsters! She almost destroyed your town! She almost destroyed our entire WORLD!” The fire in his eyes was burning a hole through Will’s body. “Say. Her. Name.”

Will shook his head back and forth.

It wasn’t her fault...

“How’s Bob?” Dustin taunted.

No...

“SAY HER FUCKING NAME!” Dustin commanded, pulling a gun out

of seemingly thin air and pointing it at Will's head. "SAY IT!!!"

"ELEVEN!" Will screamed, closing his eyes. "It was Eleven! S-she's why! She's why it happened to me! Why everything happened! Please don't kill me!" He cried out, gasping for air.

I'm sorry, El...

"Kill you? No, Will. I would never do that." Dustin replied through a chuckle. "But maybe someday, Eleven... will."

Minutes passed by. Only Will's sorrowful cries disturbed the peaceful solitude of the forest. It was beginning to snow again, the white flakes collecting on his outstretched legs.

Will slowly opened his eyes. He was alone. Alone and scared. And in pain. But then he heard a familiar voice somewhere off in the distance. It belonged to his brother, Jonathan, who was calling his name.

For a brief moment, Will debated whether or not to reply.

Notes for the Chapter:

The subterfuge continues. This time, Will was the unlikely victim... but as was pointed out in this chapter, he's pretty much always the victim, right? I know this is similar to what happened to El, but I think it helps set the tone of the whole tale. There is clearly a lot of anger and pain still out there as a result of what happened at the lab. There will be more involvement of the government and possibly other actors in the later chapters.

I'm always surprised that my word counts are under three thousand a chapter. I guess I need to be less succinct... This won't be the longest story, but I'll write as much as necessary to tie everything together. Thank you as always for reading! Chapter 5 (longer) should be posted sometime next week. I like

to keep a chapter ahead before posting a new one. I might begin 6 tomorrow.

Updated 9/20/18

5. Out of Focus

Summary for the Chapter:

He could see the fear in her eyes as the bad men approached. He tried to fight but was powerless against the stronger foes. The more he fought back, the more pain he endured. But it was worth it. She was worth it. After all, he loved her.

Notes for the Chapter:

Updated 9/21/18

*The twins Five and Six made quite the double,
They'd float you through air, as light as a bubble,
An attempted escape, an explosion of trouble,
Found still holding hands, underneath all the rubble.*

While the newly-named Jane Hopper began preparing herself for the Snow Ball later that night, the man who had provided her with the new identify was readying himself for an unexpected and unwanted conversation.

“So, Sam, how’s the leg? Healing up well?” Dr. Erik Pfeiffer asked. His tone was less than empathetic.

“It’s fine, Erik. Let’s cut the chit-chat. Why am I here?” Dr. Sam Owens asked, even though he knew perfectly well why he had been summoned.

“So just straight to business then? That’s what you want?” Dr. Pfeiffer guffawed as he was more than happy to get straight to the point.

“This isn’t a social visit. And frankly, I don’t think I have any business

to discuss with you anymore,” Sam replied.

“Where’s the girl?” Dr. Pfeiffer asked bluntly.

Sam stared at the older man sitting behind a desk with mountains of papers scattered around. His walls were covered in countless degrees, certificates and pictures with important people. He noticed the renowned scientist Albert Einstein, former President Harry Truman, Melvin Laird, who was Secretary of Defense under President Richard Nixon, and Indiana Senator Richard Lugar. There were dozens more.

“What girl?” Sam replied, shrugging and looking bemused.

“Hmph, what girl? Really, Sam? Alright, I’ll be more specific,” He replied with annoyance. “Where is Subject 11, birth name Jane Ives. Her hobbies include opening gateways to other worlds and killing people with her mind. Sound familiar?” He didn’t enjoy playing these games.

“Oh, oh that girl. Yes, I remember her,” Sam replied with a smile on his face. “I recall her closing some sort of doorway spewing out monsters and preventing the complete destruction of an American town. And, let’s be honest, the entire world.”

Dr. Owens remembered Eleven quite well. He gaped at her as he sat in the lab’s stairwell while badly injured. She had prevented further catastrophe, and in return, he had helped Chief Hopper secure a birth certificate for her. He had hoped that the girl and her new father would be able to lead a normal life. It was wishful thinking at best.

“She is the property of the United States Government. She’s a weapon, Sam. A dangerous weapon that must be recovered and controlled.” Dr. Pfeiffer stated, deadly serious.

“She was never our property, Erik. None of them were. Germany lost the war, remember?” Sam retorted, meeting the former Nazi scientist’s gaze. “Experimenting on human beings and holding them against their will is supposed to be *verboten*. How quickly some of us forgot.”

Dr. Pfeiffer remained unflustered. “Your government welcomed me

with open arms, Sam. They understood the importance of my work. And they continue to do so.”

“I don’t care what those CIA spooks think. You’ve been creating monsters. Is it really surprising that one of them ended up unleashing real monsters?” Sam’s anger was rising.

“We’re all on the same team, Sam,” Dr. Pfeiffer replied in frustration. “Further delays to the operation only benefit the other side.”

He knew that even he wasn’t immune to the increasing pressure from the US government and its agencies. Rumblings of Russia’s human experimentation projects seemed to be growing louder each day.

“No, Erik. I’m not like you or Brenner. There’s a difference between patriotism and fanaticism. Brenner’s failure to realize that proved to be a costly mistake.” Sam replied curtly.

Dr. Pfeiffer’s eyes twitched at the mention of his now deceased protege. “Where’s the girl, Sam?” He was getting tired of the back and forth.

“She’s dead. She died cleaning up the mess that your people caused,” Dr. Owen’s quickly replied. “Got sucked into that other world, that other dimension or whatever it was. She’s gone.” He hoped the lie was convincing because he knew what would happen if they found her.

“Dead?” Dr. Pfeiffer seemed genuinely surprised by the statement. “I don’t believe it. If she was dea...”

“Want proof?” Sam interrupted. “Alright, get one of your other creations, if any of them are even still alive, to open up another hole in our world and go look yourself. I bet you’d like it. Probably remind you of home. And speaking of home, that’s where I should be right now,” Sam finished while standing up with a grimace. He reached down and grabbed his cane as the other man studied him.

“Fine. Go home, Sam. Go home and pretend like you didn’t have anything to do with any of it.” Dr. Pfeiffer shot back. “Forget the whole thing. But when the next war starts, you’ll be thanking me and

those *monsters* as you call them for keeping this country safe.” His dedication to the program had always been absolute.

“Auf Wiedersehen, Doktor,” Sam said as he opened an office door. “Oh, and the next time you think about calling me? Please don’t.”

Dr. Pfeiffer didn’t respond. He knew the words would be wasted on Dr. Owens, who had, in his mind, clearly forgotten the importance of the work being done.

If only Nine was still alive, he thought as he shifted some papers on his desk.

After flipping through a few more pages, he stopped to stare at a picture of a young girl with a shaved head and sad eyes. The numbers “011” were written in the bottom-right corner.

“Where are you, Eleven?” Dr. Pfeiffer mumbled. “Mein meisterstück...”

With a heavy sigh, the old man pressed the call button on his phone terminal. “Get me Colonel Maddox,” he snapped at his secretary.

And this time, Dr. Pfeiffer said to himself, *it better be the real one*.

A few rays of sunshine were beginning to stream into his room through the partially closed blinds. However, he was blissfully unaware of the time, still asleep and dreaming of her. They were holding hands, they were dancing. They were kissing. It was a happy dream. Until it wasn’t.

He could see the fear in her eyes as the bad men approached. He tried to fight but was powerless against the stronger foes. The more he fought back, the more pain he endured. But it was worth it. She was worth it. After all, he loved her.

And then in a flash it was over. The enemy was defeated, but not by him. By her. She had saved them. She had saved him. She was standing victorious and he was no longer afraid. He approached her, his heart beating stronger than it ever had before. She stared back at him with those beautiful eyes and mischievous smirk.

He closed the distance between them, their faces close.

I love you, he whispered as he leaned in, his eyes closing as their lips touched...

“CODE RED! I repeat, CODE RED! Over!”

Lucas’s eyes whipped open and he could swear his entire body levitated off the bed from being awoken so abruptly. For a second, he couldn’t even remember where he was until he heard the voice over his Supercom once again.

“Hey! Where are you guys?? This is a Code Red emergency! Pick up! Over!”

Lucas groaned as he felt his heart pounding against his chest.

This better be a real emergency, Dustin, he thought to himself as he remembered the dream he was having.

Lucas stumbled out of his bed and grabbed the Supercom lying on the floor. He took a deep breath and then pressed the button on the side.

“Yea, yea it’s Lucas. I’m here. This better be important. Over,” he said, still groggy and unfocused.

“Wha...? YES! Yes, it’s important, Lucas. I said Code Red!” Dustin yelled back. “Don’t you know what that means? Where’s Mike!? Over!”

Mike replied a second later. “I’m here! I’m here! Sorry, I was in the bathroom. What’s wrong, Dustin? Over.” Mike’s reaction was more to Dustin’s liking.

“Jonathan just called my house,” Dustin quickly replied “He woke up and Will wasn’t there but then he found this note from him and it

said that El was missing and Will was with me looking for her! Over.”

In an instant, the blood drained from Mike’s face and the hand holding his Supercom began to shake. “WHAT? What do you mean El’s missing? Is she? Wait, did you and Will go looking for her? Why didn’t you tell me!?”

Mike was talking so quickly he didn’t even pay attention to the questions he was asking. They flowed out of him uncontrollably.

“Mike, just listen!” Dustin said as forcefully as he could. “I’m not with Will. I never went anywhere! My mom just woke me up asking if Will was here and obviously he isn’t so she told Jonathan and then he freaked out and... and, I dunno! Something happened to Will and we gotta go help! Over.”

“What about El!?” Mike replied quickly. “Where’s El?”

“MIKE!” Lucas snapped, taking his turn to yell at their friend. “Didn’t you just hear Dustin? Jonathan said Will wrote a note saying he went out with Dustin. Dustin was never there! Doesn’t that seem strange to you? This isn’t about El! Over!”

“Of course it’s about El!” Mike fired back. “Will said she was missing! I-I have to go look for her! Over.”

Dustin’s frustration was growing rapidly. “Will’s the one missing! The note said I was with Will, which is clearly bullshit, so why is the part about El true!? Maybe Will didn’t even write it! Over!”

“Why are we still arguing about this? We need to go look for Will!” Lucas replied, his annoyance with Mike also rising.

Mike knew they were right but he couldn’t shake the feeling of dread that had overtaken his mind and pulled at his heart. His worry for Will was eclipsed by a year of pain, sadness and loneliness.

El needs me, he decided.

Mike gently pressed the button on the Supercom and spoke slowly. “El could be in trouble. I-I can’t lose her again. The second I know she’s safe I’ll help find Will. I promise. Over and out.”

The only sound that followed was a distinctive click from the Supercom's power switch. Mike wasn't feeling brave enough to hear the replies from his friends. He quickly threw on some clothes and rushed towards the door. Just before he left, he turned and looked at the now silent Supercom on his bed.

"I'm sorry", Mike whispered to the empty room as he entered the hallway and closed the bedroom door behind him.

Did I ever tell you that my daughter Sara hated Eggos?

El had heard every word Hopper said. Every word about Sara. Every word about her. She watched him from the darkness of the void. She could see the sadness in his tired eyes and hear the love in his shaky voice.

Part of El just wanted to wake up and give Hopper a big hug and find comfort and solace in his embrace. But the other part, the bigger part, refused to leave the safety of the empty blackness. El was often scared of what she would see and experience there, but not then. In that moment, she wasn't afraid of the void. What she did fear was what, or more specifically who, might be waiting for her in the real world.

Mike! She remembered.

Bad Mike? She contemplated.

Not Mike. She stated firmly.

El tried to concentrate on the scene in the woods again. In an instant, the forest began to materialize around her. She was back in the clearing. And then she saw... him. He was standing there in front of her. There was Mike.

Not Mike, she reassured herself as her heart began to beat faster, the

fear rising again.

'It doesn't look like an angel,' he had said to her.

El studied the face. It looked like Mike, but something wasn't right. She took a deep breath and moved closer.

'It looks just like you, Eleven. It looks like a monster.'

She shuttered while remembering the horrible words and the vision began to blur.

"NO!" El yelled, as she struggled to maintain control. Slowly, the scene returned to the darkness. A memory she hated but had to preserve.

'It doesn't look like an angel...'

El noticed how part of the face appeared to be twisted unnaturally and his expression was dark and...

His eyes! El gasped to herself as she moved even closer.

It was the eyes that truly gave it away. Mike's usually dark eyes had almost glowed, revealing a strange brightness underneath.

It was dark when they were standing there in the forest and she was so transfixed by the vicious words that El barely noticed the eyes. But now she could clearly see the hint of blue, a crack in the false veneer of Michael Wheeler.

Not Mike, El concluded. *So who?*

"Son of a bitch!" Dustin screamed as his foot slammed into the corner of the dining room table. He was rushing around to gather supplies before meeting up with Lucas. "Where is it!?"

“Dusty! Are you alright?” His mother asked from her favorite living room chair. Tews was busy purring on her lap, seemingly oblivious to Dustin’s frantic outbursts.

“My hat! Where’s my stupid winter hat!? Dammit, son of a bitch...” Dustin continued to mutter curses as he ran back towards his room. “Found it!”

“Dusty, what’s going on with Will? Why did Jonathan think he was with you?” Mrs. Henderson asked with mild concern.

“It’s fine, Mom. It’s uhh... just part of this new campaign we’re doing. No time to explain. I gotta run,” Dustin replied as he finished packing his bag, his heavy wool hat pulled down over his ears. He strode to the door with purpose. “Bye Mom!”

“Okay, love you, Dusty! Say bye-bye Tews!” Mrs. Henderson said as she lifted one of the cat’s paws and waved it at her son. Tews’ expression was less than enthusiastic.

“Yea, love you Mom. Bye!” Dustin said over his shoulder as he scurried outside. He was temporarily blinded by the sunlight as he retrieved his bike and peddled away. The morning snow shower had just ended, leaving a thin layer of white on the roads.

Soon enough, Dustin saw Lucas waiting at the intersection, waiting impatiently. He looked cold even with his winter gear on as he brushed the last of the snowflakes from his jacket.

“What took you so long? Weren’t you the one who was all ‘Code Red! Code Red!’ and stuff?” Lucas snapped as Dustin braked to a stop in front of him.

“Shut up! I had to pack our supplies!” Dustin shot back. “You don’t even have your Supercom with you!”

“What’s the freaking point?” Lucas replied as he and Dustin took off down the street. “Mike isn’t coming, Will obviously didn’t answer and you have yours!”

“It’s protocol! We have to keep all lines of communication open between the Party!” Dustin was already beginning to breathe

heavier. They were speeding to Will's as fast as possible.

"The *Party!*? What Party?" Lucas retorted. "It's just me and you here. No Mike, no El, no Max. Max doesn't even have a damn Supercom!" He tried to focus his anger on pedaling faster.

"It's my fault. I shouldn't have mentioned El." Dustin replied, feeling more dejected than angry. "Mike always freaks out when he hears her name."

"No, it's Mike's fault for acting like a asshole and abandoning us. Let's just find Will. Mike can do whatever he wants with El." Lucas was done talking about their wayward friend.

Some paladin, he thought.

It took several more minutes of frantic peddling until the Byers' house finally came into view. Jonathan's car was still out front but there was no sign of activity.

"Jesus Christ!" Dustin exclaimed as he finally brought his bike to stop in front of the house. He felt completely exhausted.

Dustin was bent over and his hands on his knees. "I-I feel like we..." He breathed in heavily again. "I feel like we just made the Kessel Run in under twelve parsecs!"

"Well stop carrying so much stuff in your backpack! You didn't need to bring snacks!" Lucas replied while trying to hide his own exhaustion.

"We always need snacks!" Dustin said with indignation. "You just..."

The sound of voices in the distance interrupted their conversation. There was movement in the woods to the left of the house and they witnessed Jonathan's figure emerging just a few moments later. He was carrying something that looked a lot like a small body.

"Oh shit, oh shit." Lucas mumbled as they ran toward the tree line. "Jonathan! Is that Will!? What happened to him?" He yelled as he reached the pair with Dustin hot on his heels.

“Will! Oh man, we were just coming to look for you!” Dustin chimed in.

Jonathan stopped short as they approached, looking surprised. Will slowly turned his head towards his friends. Neither brother said anything at first and Lucas and Dustin could see the streaks of tears on Will’s face. They were confused by the silence.

“Will, what happened?” Lucas tried asking again in a calmer tone.

“P-prove it’s you!” Will said quickly, staring at Dustin. “Prove it’s really you!”

“Wait wha...? Oooh” Lucas replied as he remembered the note Will had left and what it said. He turned his attention to Dustin.

Dustin thought for a second. “The night you went missing last year. We left Mike’s and made a bet to see who could get to my house first. The bet was for any comic book we had. You won and said you’d take my X-Men #134. And uhh... sorry, I guess I still haven’t given it to you.”

Some of the apprehension left Will’s face. “It’s okay, Jonathan. That’s definitely Dustin,” he said while giving his friends a faint smile.

“Alright. C’mon guys, we gotta get Will in the house. He’s freezing and he hurt his ankle,” Jonathan said, still feeling on edge.

“I’ll be okay guys,” Will said, quietly. “Have you heard anything about El?” He hoped the story he had heard was a lie and that she hadn’t actually disappeared.

Lucas and Dustin exchanged a quick glance. They both knew it wasn’t the time to bring the focus to Mike and his actions.

“Uhh... Mike’s checking on El. We don’t know anything yet.” Lucas carefully stated.

The group walked in silence towards the house, the only sound coming from the snow crunching beneath their feet. Will leaned his head back against Jonathan and sighed heavily. He knew that Christmas was only nine days away, but just like last year, traumatic

events were spoiling this usually joyous time of year.

As the others began entering the house, Lucas held back at the doorway. He turned and took a final glance toward the woods where Jonathan and Will had appeared. He felt uneasy, as if something was out there, watching them. Lucas shook his head as he walked inside and closed the door.

You're being paranoid, he told himself.

He wasn't.

Mike got all the way to his bike before realizing he had no idea where to go. He knew that the Chief had been hiding El in a cabin, but he'd never been there before.

Think, think, he told himself. Mike kept turning his head to look up and down his street.

It has to be further away than Will's house, he surmised.

Another minute of confused silence passed by.

"Uhh... shit," Mike said as he felt completely useless.

He knew that he had just willingly abandoned Dustin and Lucas on their quest to find Will to instead check on El, but had no clue where to even begin the search. And then, he remembered.

Nancy! He screamed to himself, as he ran back inside. Nancy's been there before!

Mike bounded back up the stairs and approached the closed door of his sister's room. He swallowed hard as he knocked twice. He heard an annoyed sigh and then footsteps before the door swung open.

“What is it Mo... Mike?” Nancy asked quizzically. She couldn’t believe he was even awake that early.

“Look, no time to explain but I think something happened to El and I need to find her! I was going to leave but I don’t know where the Chief’s cabin is b-because I never been there but then I remembered you were there because of Will and...” Mike couldn’t get the words out fast enough.

“MIKE!” Nancy yelled as she grabbed him by the shoulders. “Calm down. What do you mean you think something happened to El? Did someone tell you that?”

“No! Well, I mean kinda. It’s complicated,” Mike replied as he averted his gaze. “I-I really need your help.”

Nancy could see how visibly upset her brother was. She had gotten used to Mike being depressed and withdrawn for almost a year. It was a great relief to her, and everyone really, when El had returned. The impact she had on Mike was immediate: He was smiling again, he was living again. Even though it was against her better judgment, Nancy knew she had to help.

“Fine,” she said through a sigh. “I’ll take you to the cabin.”

“R-really? You’ll take me to El!?” Mike was surprised that Nancy had capitulated to his request so quickly.

“I’ll help you make sure that she’s okay and not in any danger. That’s it. This isn’t a play date, Mike.” Nancy couldn’t help but tease her love-struck younger brother whenever she got the chance.

Mike blushed at the word date and averted his eyes once again. “Wha? Uhh.. yea, yea I know,” he mumbled.

“Uh-huh. Look, give me ten minutes and I’ll drive you, alright?” Nancy replied. “Now go downstairs and wait. I’m sure she’s just fine.”

Nancy almost hoped that something was amiss because she knew Hopper was probably going to kill her for revealing the location of the cabin for no reason.

Nancy was deep in concentration trying to remember the exact location of the cabin as she and Mike journeyed down the winding roads. The entire area was still heavily camouflaged in snow but Nancy knew the turn wasn't too far off.

Mike was feeling incredibly nervous. His left leg was bouncing up and down quickly and he was staring at his folded hands.

"Are we getting close?" He asked, glancing up towards Nancy. It didn't seem like she heard him as she continued to focus straight ahead.

"Nancy!" Mike said, louder this time and breaking her focus.

"What? Mike! I'm trying to concentrate here," she replied while sounding a bit annoyed.

"Why is this place so far away? Something could've happened to El and no one can get there quickly and it's all because of the Chief and his stupid idea and El needs me but no one seems to care and..." Mike was rambling again which only irritated the now distracted Nancy even more.

"Mike!" Nancy snapped while whipping her head towards her brother. "Stop, okay? Just stop. You know why she's out here. We'll be there in a few minutes and then everything will be fi..."

"WATCH OUT!" Mike suddenly yelled as he grabbed ahold of the steering wheel and yanked it to the right. The wail of screeching tires drowned out the sound of Nancy's terrified scream as the car careened off the road and slammed into a ditch. It came to a stop with a thunderous bang. And then there was silence.

A lone figure approached the damaged vehicle and peered through the driver's side window. The driver was slumped over, apparently unconscious as a trickle of blood ran down her forehead. The

passenger was still awake but appeared disoriented and confused.

Mike moaned as he turned his head toward Nancy. He could barely think straight and his eyes weren't focusing.

Standing in the road...

The world was getting darker.

We were going to hit...

He could see his sister slumped over the wheel.

Nancy...

There was movement outside the car and Mike blinked in an attempt to clear his vision. And then their eyes met.

"El?" Mike said, in barely a whisper as his head fell back against the car seat and the world faded to black.

Notes for the Chapter:

No happy endings ever!!! Well, not yet anyway.
Maybe next time! (probably not)

Finally a decently long chapter, right? With six chapters left, I need to figure out how to space out the rest of the planned events. Ch. 11 may end up being more of an epilogue, but I'm still thinking about it. Depends how much space I need to fill before then... I know there's a lot of buildup and cliffhangers but I promise that everything will lead to a big conclusion. Think Game of Thrones or The Walking Dead: Lots of buildup and then an epic battle! Anyway, I've been super busy and haven't even started Ch. 6 yet, so hopefully that will be up by next weekend. Thanks as always for the kudos and kind comments and I hope you enjoy this latest chapter!

Updated 9/21/18. Much better!

6. Time Heals No Wounds

Summary for the Chapter:

He knew they were going to punish him for the loss. They were going to hurt him really, really badly. Her suffering had come to an end but his would continue. At least for a while longer.

Notes for the Chapter:

WARNING: Depictions of violence and torture are included in this chapter.

Updated 9/21/18

*Stupendous, salacious, sensational Seven,
Silently shivering, slit, sliced, slashed, striven,
They tore him apart, so ruthless and craven,
He sees through their eyes, their crimes unforgiven.*

Memories can be more painful than the freshest wounds.

The coldness didn't bother him anymore as he had forgotten what warmth felt like. The chill in the air and the frigidness of the concrete and steel were constants in his life. Plastic gloves and metal knives. Glass needles and leather straps. Everything had been cold except for the blood that poured from his body. The blood felt warm on his skin. Bleeding was one of the few times he felt alive.

Even when he been outside, which wasn't often, he felt nothing. He never feel the heat from the sun even on the brightest Summer day. He often tried to remember what that feeling was like. He supposed something akin to standing near a fire, the warmth radiating over a body, stinging any exposed areas. But his body had felt none of that. Not for a long time. All

that remained was the cold.

He had been able to determinate about how much time had passed: Three years. He couldn't remember the day or even the month it happened, but it had been sometime in 1969. His mind had been scrambled by Two but he never held that against her. He knew it wasn't her decision. And besides, it was clear that they had tortured her almost as badly as him. She had the scars to prove it.

He missed Two's smile. It was a smile she hid from almost everyone else. Her big, white teeth had always shone like a beacon in the darkness of her prison. He truly missed that smile. It sometimes pained him that she was gone, but he was glad to have been able to help set her free.

He was there when she did it that fateful night. He watched as the blood flowed from her wrists. She never shed a single tear throughout the process. Before her eyes closed for the final time, she looked straight into his eyes and smiled. It was the happiest smile he had ever seen upon her tiny face.

He stayed there, staring at her face even as he heard the loud footsteps of the guards running towards them. They were far too late. Another of their weapons had been silenced.

He knew they were going to punish him for the loss. They were going to hurt him really, really badly. Her suffering had come to an end but his would continue. At least for a while longer.

He smiled as the guards entered the room. A smile even wider than Two's.

El's eyes fluttered open. The fire had long since died down and the cold air of the cabin attacked her exposed face. She was glad that at least her body still felt warm. She glanced down at the mass of blankets piled on top of her before gaze settled on the source of the loud snores echoing throughout the cabin: Hopper. He had fallen

asleep on the floor without even a single blanket to cover his sizeable figure.

El thought he looked cold, so with a grunt she lifted herself up from the couch and pushed her mountain of blankets onto him. Unsurprisingly, Hopper remained sound asleep. She hoped that he would feel a little warmer when he finally awoke. El was in no hurry to disturb his slumber, though. She knew that would only mean loud conversations and a million questions.

El kept a single blanket for herself, which she wrapped around her body as she walked towards her room. She didn't remember leaving the void during the night. However, she did recall going back to the clearing in the woods and seeing him. She remembered seeing the boy who claimed to be Mike.

Mike! El thought as she hurried into her room, closing her door quickly but quietly with a wave of her hand.

Tossing the blanket aside, El jumped on her bed and wrapped the towel she kept nearby around her head, covering her eyes. She had been so focused on the imposter Mike that she had almost forgotten to visit the real one.

El's breathing steadied. She let her mind expand and do what it had to do to find him. The familiar blackness returned and she looked around frantically for a bed and a boy with messy hair and kind eyes. But what she saw wasn't a bed.

Mike...

El ran towards the car in a panic. It was tipped at a weird angle and appeared eerily still even though she could hear the engine running.

"MIKE!" She yelled, as she reached the vehicle.

It was, however, Nancy who El first saw. In the driver's seat was Mike's older sister who had been so kind to her, who had brought her a dress for the Snow Ball and who had comforted her during her unexpected and hurried exit. El always thought Nancy looked so pretty, but now her face was marred by streaks of blood emanating

from a cut on her forehead.

El was about to scream when she saw Mike in the passenger seat. It looked like he was still conscious, although dazed and woozy. He looked over toward Nancy before his gaze focused in her general direction.

“Mike! Mike!” She yelled again, wondering if he could somehow see or hear her.

El saw his lips move ever so slightly before his head fell back against the seat. Her screams could no longer be contained. She reached for the car as the scene vanished and the void collapsed around her.

The moment El returned she ripped off the improvised blindfold and opened her door in one fluid motion. Hopper was already at the entranceway.

“Kid! You’re awake, it’s okay! What happene...”

“Mike!” El yelled, cutting him off. “And Nancy! Car accident! They need help!”

She leapt from the bed and began throwing on random clothing lying on the bedroom floor. Tears were running down her cheeks and a trickle of blood was oozing from her nose.

“Car accident!? How do y...? Christ, never mind. Let’s go!” Hopper quickly replied.

It was clear from El’s bloodied upper lip and frantic behavior that she had either witnessed the event or had seen the aftermath. There was no reason for him to ever doubt her. Less than a minute later they were in Hooper’s car, racing down the road towards town. It only took another minute to encounter the scene of the accident.

“Oh no...” Hopper said quietly before shouting commands into the radio receiver.

The car was still coming to halt as El threw open the door, jumped out and began sprinting towards the Wheeler’s vehicle. She could hear Hopper calling for backup and an ambulance.

They're fine! El screamed to herself as the car rolled backwards out of the ditch and onto the road. All four doors flew open at once as she ran to the passenger side and Hopper rushed to check on Nancy.

"Mike! I'm here!" She said, as she placed a hand on his forehead and squeezed his limp hand with her other one. "You're okay, Mike. Nancy too! You'll be o-okay," El's entire body was shaking as she sobbed.

"I p-promise!"

Memories may fade, but scars never disappear.

Warmth. He was feeling warmth again. Unfortunately, it was a warmth that caused the hair on his arms to singe and his skin to bubble and blister. The pain he felt was immense, but that didn't stop him from being impressed by her skill. He watched as the flames danced around his body, coiling and slithering like an entranced snake. It was mesmerizing. He just would've preferred not being on the receiving end of that spectacle.

But for all her fire and fury, he thought that Three was actually pretty cool. She had shown up just before Two's tragic demise. He didn't really think about it until that point, but it was so obvious that there were a bunch of them. He had figured at least seven anyway. Assigning each subject a number had made it easy to keep track of their progress.

He had learned that some of the others were kept at another facility in the Northeast. That was after he had already searched every room in his building. He had been fairly certain that everyone there had been accounted for but worried that they were better at hiding things than he thought.

One died before he arrived. Although he never met the first subject, he overheard a few stories. One had refused to continue to do their bidding so they tortured him relentlessly. Unfortunately, they got carried away during

a session and that was that.

After learning about One, he tried to find out as much information on the others as possible, with varying degrees of success. Luckily, there had been someone else with a similar objective.

He didn't get to interact with Three very often, but his powers were growing steadily. The increased ability had allowed him to move about more freely and speak to her outside of sessions. He had to confess, being constantly tortured produced decent results. Not that he ever admitted that to them, though.

Three's memories had also been scrambled by the dearly departed Two, but she recalled living near the water as a young child. A lot of water. He guessed somewhere along the Pacific Ocean based on the scattered details she was able to provide.

The girl was quite petite and frail but always wore a furious expression. The shaved head only enhanced her wild demeanor. They had cut her hair right after she arrived. No more hair meant no more any combs. They had learned from that mistake.

He felt bad for Three and the loss of her hair, but worse for the other girl who suffered a similar fate. She was a girl who had also been assigned a number. It quickly became his new favorite number.

Three had apologized profusely after their latest session. She always apologized and was consistently surprised when he just laughed in response before offering congratulations on her increasing power. Besides, he knew there was no sense in being mean to her. She didn't have much time left.

When the day finally arrived, he avoided any of the blame. Three's death was ruled a tragic accident. Unlike with Two, he had played a more behind-the-scenes role: Whispering in her ear, planting seeds and watching them grow. The plan had seemed viable to her. Of course, he had failed to mention to her that by "escape" he didn't mean from the facility, but from life itself.

The firestorm she created had severely damaged the entire Third Floor

Lab. Two of the lead scientists were killed and eight other individuals badly burned. Unfortunately, the cameras had been unable to see through the smoke. If they had been able to, they would have recorded a young girl strapped to a table as the flames consumed her. The straps had remained very secure.

The cameras would have also observed a boy standing over her. Watching her. Telling her that it was all going to be over soon.

The last thing she saw was a pair of dazzlingly blue eyes, their icy gaze failing to cool her burning flesh. And then the flames vanished.

And so did he.

Jonathan was fairly certain that Will hadn't broken his ankle. He remembered years ago when he had fallen down a flight of stairs at school.

Pushed down, he recalled with a grimace.

The younger Jonathan's ankle had snapped and the pain had been unbearable. He was in a cast for six weeks. Will's injury appeared to be less severe.

"I think it's just a bad sprain," Jonathan said as he rubbed Will's ankle and turned his foot from side to side. "You got lucky."

Will grimaced as Jonathan continued to examine him.

"Lucky!?" Dustin shouted at him. "You think he's lucky!? May I remind you that *Bizarro Dustin* tried to..."

"*Bizarro Dustin*?" Lucas interrupted. "Are we really going to call him that?"

"Yes, because that's what he is! He's an evil, mirror image of me and he tried to kill Will!" Dustin replied, waving his arms around.

"He didn't want to kill me," Will said through clenched teeth.

He wished Jonathan would stop pretending to be a doctor for a second and leave his injured foot alone. His head was still throbbing too. There was a small cut on the back of his head, but that would heal without leaving much of a scar.

“How do you know that?” Jonathan asked, finally removing his hands from Will’s ankle and replacing them with an ice pack.

“He told me,” Will replied with a sigh.

The others listened intently as the injured boy regaled them with the tale of his early morning adventure. Will explained how *Bizarro Dustin* - Lucas grumbled in protest - had lured him away from the house under the pretense of searching for El. He explained that although there were warning signs that something was amiss, he could never have imagined that the person he was with wasn’t actually Dustin.

“Like I said,” Will continued, “he looked just like you, sounded the same. I-I should’ve paid more attention though. I don’t know. I was worried about El but I shouldn’t have just left. I’m sorry, Jonathan. I’m sorry to you guys too. I got everyone worried about me again.” His eyes were tearing up again.

“Hey, it’s not your fault,” Jonathan said as he wrapped an arm around Will’s shoulders. “You couldn’t have known it was a trap. But... but you should have woken me up, Will. You can’t just take off like that.”

“I-I know,” Will replied, sniffing a bit. “It’s just... El searched for me w-when I was missing. She didn’t even know me and she tried to save me...”

‘Saved you!? She almost got you killed! Twice!’

Tears began streaming down the boy’s face as he continued. “F-for once I wanted to help her.”

‘She opened a gate to another dimension! She released the monsters!’

His heart began beating faster and faster as he remembered the words. “I tried to be b-brave for once...” Will stammered, feeling

more pathetic by the second.

'She almost destroyed your town! She almost destroyed our entire WORLD!'

"For once!?" Lucas repeated with incredulity. "Will, you were trapped in the Upside Down for a week and survived! None of us could've done that."

'Say. Her. Name.'

"And you were the one who told us how to defeat the Mind Flayer!" Dustin added. "You never gave up, Will, even when it tried to control you. You're the bravest Cleric in the whole world!"

'SAY HER FUCKING NAME!'

Will slowly shook his head back and forth. "N-no, you're wrong. I-I told him it was her fault. I s-said she was the reason everything bad happened." His sobs continued. "I be... I betrayed her." He felt like cracks were forming all over him.

'ELEVEN! It was Eleven!'

"What!?" Jonathan interjected. "You didn't betray anyone. Just saying something doesn't mean..."

"I-I didn't want to say it..." Will continued. He felt as though he was splitting apart.

'S-she's why! She's why it happened to me! Why everything happened!'

"But I was... I was so s-scared." He couldn't take it anymore.

'P-please don't kill me!'

Lucas and Dustin watched in stunned silence as the most kind and loyal friend anybody could ever ask for was shattering into pieces in front of them. Without any hesitation they both rushed forward and wrapped their wounded warrior in a tight embrace.

"It's not your fault." Jonathan said.

'Kill you?'

"We got you buddy." Added Lucas.

'No, Will.'

"We're going to find *Bizarro Dustin* and kick his ass!" Dustin squeezed Will even harder.

'I would never do that.'

"You're just as brave as El!" Lucas meant it.

'But maybe someday, Eleven... will.'

Will continued to cry into his friends' shoulders as his brother rubbed his back. He heard what they said and he knew they were being completely serious, but he couldn't shake the feelings of guilt and cowardice that had filled him.

Will thought about how this latest incident represented the third time he had been targeted and hurt in less than a year and a half. He wondered how much more everyone expected him to take and how much more pain he could cause his friends and family. He thought about his Mother...

"Don't tell Mom." Will said, finally breaking his silence. "Don't tell Mom what happened. She... she doesn't need more to worry about."

Jonathan didn't protest. "We don't have to tell her today. We'll just say you tripped out back or something. But we have to tell her the truth eventually, okay?" He asked, staring into Will's sad, tired eyes.

Will sighed as he slowly nodded.

Eventually...

The only thing worse than a partial memory is a complete one.

"They're dead," she said matter-of-factly. They were walking together, side by side, hand in hand. They were headed nowhere because there was nowhere to go.

"Wha-what?" He stuttered, turning towards her abruptly.

"Five and Six. They're dead" She replied as she continued to stare straight ahead. Her tone was apathetic.

"Both of them!? When? How?" He was genuinely surprised by this turn of events.

"Two days ago. There was an escape attempt that, for some strange reason, didn't quite go according to plan." She still wouldn't look at him.

"Oh really? What a surprise," he replied sarcastically. "Doesn't sound very original though..."

*At that, she stopped and turned to look up at him. "Oh, is that so? I wasn't aware that it had to be different each time." She leaned in closer to him and whispered. "Is that what you want? Something **new** and **exciting**?" Her free hand was pressed against his chest. She started to move it lower and lower. "Is that what gets you..."*

"Fuck off," he interrupted. But he didn't stop her hand. He smiled down at her as he moaned. "Mmm you're incorrigible. You know that?"

"Oh, you love it," she replied, giggling. Her beautiful brown eyes twinkled in the darkness.

"I love you, Susie," he immediately replied.

He had never been more serious about anything in his entire life. He loved her from the moment she entered his world. She was the only thing that mattered.

"I told you not to say that," Susie said quietly while averting her gaze. "You know this will be never be possible... for real anyway."

Susie turned her head and observed the endless nothingness staring back

at her. It was an empty world where they could be alone together. Free of them. Free of pain.

"I don't care," he replied before suddenly spinning her around and catching her in a full-body hug as she shrieked in surprise. "Wait, did you not know I was going to do that?"

Susie simply giggled and gave him a knowing look. The boy smirked at her, his eyes shining and filled with mirth.

"Famously-fabulous, future-foretelling, fearless, foreboding, fantastically-four was just caught off guard by me?" He asked before sticking out his tongue.

Four was laughing uncontrollably into his chest. She loved how clever and silly and he was. His words disarmed her even quicker than his brilliant blue eyes.

"I-I can't breathe," she said as tears streamed down her face and the laughter continued. "You're... you're so stupid, Steven!"

She had given him that name. He couldn't remember his real one. He didn't mind one bit.

"Stupid!?" Steven replied, feigning irritation. "Hmph. Well, then no more poems for you!"

"NOOOOO!!!" Four squealed. "Do you have a new one? You do, don't you!? Tell meeeee!" She demanded, smacking his chest.

"Umm... OUCH! That hurt! And not just my body, but my feelings." He quipped as he made his lips quiver.

"Aww poor baby. C'mere, let me kiss your boo-boo and make it all better." Four replied as she pressed her lips against the shirt covering his chest. She then moved up to his neck and gave him another peck. Finally, she found his lips and kissed him deeply. "Mmm... feel better?"

"Much," he replied as he caressed her back with his hands. "Okay, I guess you earned it. Ahem!"

*“Surrounded by the infinite unknown,
Adrift in my mind, absolutely alone,
Electric thoughts to guide me home,
I’m not myself but I am my own.”*

The girl wasn’t laughing anymore. Her breathing slowed and her heart began to beat faster.

“What’s wrong, Susie? Didn’t you like it?” Steven could feel her shiver in his arms.

Susie thought back to the first time she had entered this realm. How they had coerced her to go in. How they forced her to exit. The circular burns of the cattle prod pockmarked her body.

“I loved it,” she finally replied. “What are you going to do about Nine?”

“Back to business so soon?” Steven started swaying with her, dancing to the sounds of silence. “I have some ideas.” He said before placing his forehead against hers. He hummed contentedly.

Susie loved the feeling of his skin against hers. “Don’t let him suffer too much. He’s just a kid...”

“We’re ALL kids!” Steven snapped, while pulling away from her. “We were kids, we still are kids! Every one of us!” His hands clenched into fists.

“Well, not Ten...” She replied wistfully, saddened by the sudden loss of his touch.

“Fuck that piece of shit! He’ll get what’s coming to him. You saw what happens, right?” He asked, pacing around.

Susie bit her lip. “I-I think... I told you there are no guarantees. They’re just visions. It’s hard to interpret them sometimes.”

When she finished speaking she reflexively brought her hands up to her chest and grimaced as if in pain. Steven noticed her movement and stopped pacing. His eyes narrowed.

“What did they do now?” He asked, his voice filled with anger.

Susie thought for a moment before lowering her arms. This wasn’t their first time playing the game.

“You know the rule,” she said while trying to force a slight smile. “I’ll show you mine if you show my yours.”

In an instant Steven’s dirty-blond hair disappeared along with his smooth skin. His blue suit, crisp white shirt and checkered bowtie, the white rose on his lapel and even the socks and shoes on his feet vanished. He stood in front of her as he existed out there, in the real world.

Steven’s body was an exhibition of pain and suffering. Countless cuts and bruises. Fresh burns and old scars. Badly healed bones and dried blood. He looked emaciated and weak. But she wasn’t shocked by what she saw. She stopped feigning surprise entirely after the incident a few months ago.

It had been soon after Three died and their brutality had reached a new level of horror. It was probably revenge for their fallen comrades. Susie had tried to warn him of the pending attack but wasn’t able to reach him in time. Her gaze travelled down from his sliced-up chest, past the ridges on his stomach, down to...

They had left him with nothing. Any doubts they may have had about their plans ended after that last butchery.

“Are you ready?” Steven’s voice was unsteady. He dreaded what he was going to see this time. Susie nodded.

He focused his mind and removed the facade he had created especially for her. The dark place allowed him more control than the real world. They both desired at least a few moments of normality now and then. The only thing she had requested was that he not alter her hair. The hair she used to have before it had been sheared.

Gone were her waves of brown locks and the glistening tiara placed delicately between them. The diamond earrings and the pearls strung around her neck dissipated. Her strapless midnight blue dress, long white gloves and high-heeled shoes faded away. Four was much shorter than him now.

Steven's breathing stopped as he stared at her. His eyes were ablaze with a fury she had rarely seen before. He joked about his injuries but every new wound she received drove him wild. The one visible to him now was far worse than a simple cut or burn. A large number "4" had been carved into the center of her chest, mirroring the "7" sliced onto his.

Seven's scream was deafening and echoed into eternity.

Notes for the Chapter:

So, we've finally learned a little bit more about who Steven - or should I say 'Seven' - is and where he came from. I'll let the readers form their own opinions on him for now. He might be flawed but he's a pretty good poet, right? There will be far more of him as the story winds down. That's right, we've passed the halfway mark! Only 5 chapters left to wrap everything up with a neat little bow. I'm still writing chapter 7 and I should really storyboard the rest of this tale... but eh, what's the fun in that?

I hope everyone enjoys this chapter. I just did some last minute edits and fixes, but I'll never be completely satisfied so why not just post it? Maybe there will be a version 2.0 of this entire story in the future so I can iron out all the kinks. Anywho, thanks for reading! Hopefully another chapter next week.

Updated 9/21/18.

7. Leftovers

Summary for the Chapter:

He stared at her sitting there against the brick. He hadn't expected to do anything besides talk. "I'm sorry. I lost my temper for a minute there. It won't happen again, I promise." He tone was apologetic and sincere. He knew she would forgive him.

Have you heard the news about Eight?

Her power is illusion, deception first-rate,

Walked out the front door, right past the front gate,

She's killing them now, reversing her fate.

Thanksgiving. It was Thanksgiving and she hadn't had a single thing to eat all day. She had meant to, but the incident that morning had thrown all of her plans into chaos. Her stomach grumbled in anger but she continued to ignore it.

Her hands rested on the rooftop ledge as she gazed out over the city. The sun was setting and the air was getting cooler by the minute. She shivered slightly. *Where is he?* She thought, hoping he wouldn't show up.

There weren't many people walking the streets, she observed, peering over the edge. Not even many cars. Most of the denizens were probably inside a warm home enjoying an enormous feast, surrounded by friends and family. That was something she never experienced. *Never will.*

"I can give you eight reasons why you should jump."

She froze. The hair on the back of her neck stood up as she slowly removed her hands from the ledge and backed away from it. She scolded herself for letting him sneak up on her. She hadn't been herself all day.

"And I can give you seven reasons why you shouldn't have come here," she replied, turning towards the voice.

"Family should always be together during the holidays," he declared, walking towards her. "Nice to see you again, Kali."

Kali simply nodded. Her hands were clenched into fists but still shaking slightly. Her powers were at the ready. "Steven. How did you find me?"

Steven ignored the question as he walked towards the ledge and sat on it, facing her. "Did you and your *sister* have fun?" He teased.

"Jane," she quickly replied. "Her name is Jane, but you already knew that, didn't you? Why didn't you tell me she was still alive?"

Steven's mind brought him back to a conversation he had years ago in the blackness with another girl. She made him promise so many things that day. And he had kept those promises so far. *Every single one.*

"That's not important," he said, his thoughts returning to the present. "I heard about an attempted murder in Chicago recently. An *attempted* murder." He repeated, emphasizing that particular word.

Kali remembered the night her crew had taken Jane with them on a job. It had not gone according to plan. Not at all.

"Why is Ray Carroll still alive, Kali? Please, enlighten me." His demeanor was dark and menacing.

"I... We..." Kali was briefly taken aback by the question. She sighed and collected her thoughts. "It was Jane who located Ray. We brought her with us that night and she told us that he was alone in the house. Everything was going fine until..." She pictured Ray on the floor, gasping for air as Jane choked him with her mind. She had been so close to finishing it.

“Until what?” Steven interjected. “Your aim not what it used to be?”

“Jane was wrong. The house wasn’t empty. He... he had kids. She was killing him but she stopped when she found out. I was going to finish the job but she didn’t let me.” Kali had been furious at Jane for depriving her of that revenge.

“She didn’t let you? What, she stopped all of you?” He sounded incredulous.

“The kids called the cops! We had to leave. I’m just as angry as you are, Steven. Don’t think I’m not. I’m the one out here fighting while you’re...” She was yelling at him now.

“I’m what?” Steven interrupted. “Tell me all about your troubles, Kali. I really want to hear them.”

“Do you know how many I’ve killed!? Do you?” She asked, lowering her voice but speaking with the same intensity. “Ten. I’ve killed ten of those fucking monsters so far. Where’s the blood on your hands?” She instantly regretted saying that last sentence.

Steven’s exterior visage disappeared in the blink of an eye. He lunged towards Kali before she could react and wrapped his hands around her neck while violently shoving her up against the nearby wall.

“BLOOD? DO YOU WANT TO SEE BLOOD!?” He screamed, as spiders ran up his arms, snakes coiled around his body and a soldier aimed a gun directly at his head. Kali was gasping for air as her powers flowed out of her in desperation.

“I could have killed you years ago when you were just a stupid, sniveling, scared little girl conjuring flowers and butterflies.” He continued to squeeze her throat as she struggled to free herself. Knives were slicing into his arms. “Do you want to know how I was going to do it? Do you want to know how you were going to die?”

“Steven!” She gasped, her vision blurring. “Stop!” She grabbed his arm. “Wh-what would Four say?”

“NO!” Steven yelled as he released his grasp, causing her to fall to the ground. He was fuming as he stood over her. “Do. Not. Call. Her.

That. EVER!" He punched the metal door next to her after every word. The loud bangs reverberating down the stairwell. "There's your fucking blood!" he said, displaying his shredded knuckles.

Kali was still breathing hard. She was shocked at what had just transpired. "Steven..." She began, trying hard to form the words. "You're really here. It's... it's actually you." She assumed it was the usual mirage, similar to the ones she was able to create.

"Yea it's me. In the flesh *and blood*. Disappointed?" Steven snapped, inspecting his newest injury. "I wanted to give you a nice surprise for Thanksgiving." He wiped the bloodied hand on his torn jeans.

"Bullshit," she fired back, massaging her bruised neck. "That really hurt, you fucking asshole."

He stared at her sitting there against the brick. He hadn't expected to do anything besides talk. "I'm sorry. I lost my temper for a minute there. It won't happen again, I promise." He tone was apologetic and sincere. He knew she would forgive him.

Kali inspected the figure standing before her. No longer was he dressed in sharp looking suit, overcoat and scarf. No more perfectly combed hair and smooth features. The real Steven was shorter, thinner and only shielded from the cold with a dirty sweater and jeans. Most of his injuries were obscured, but his face was still scarred and there was no hair upon his head.

Steven knew she was inspecting him, judging him. He didn't care. His camouflage was empowering but it took a lot of energy to maintain. More and more each day. He walked over to Kali and let himself slide down the door and onto the roof. And then there they were, sitting on a roof, in the cold, in a lonely city, side by side.

"So not spiders, not snakes, not the military or even knives cutting into you." Kali mumbled, looking over at him. "What frightens you these days, Steven?"

"Nothing. Nothing scares me anymore," he replied quickly, turning his head toward hers. She could hear his heaving breathing and wheezing. The lower part of his face was drenched in blood.

“How long?” Kali asked, searching his eyes for an answer. They were still a brilliant shade of blue, practically glowing. Steven almost always kept them blue. He had mentioned offhandedly once that blue had been Four’s favorite color. *Susie’s favorite color*, she corrected herself.

Steven remained silent for a moment before responding. “A few months maybe.” He shrugged. “Probably less. I’m glad.”

“I’m not,” Kali whispered. She meant it.

He allowed himself to smile just slightly at her. “Don’t be sad. I’m sick of it all.” His body ached and his head was pounding. “Why do you think I came here in person?”

Kali had an idea but didn’t answer. She just shook her head back and forth slowly, awaiting his reply.

“I can’t project very far anymore. I used to be able to cross oceans. Now? Fuck, I’m lucky if I can make the next town over.” He sighed heavily before continuing. “Have you noticed any changes yet?” He was older than her by a several years but she had always been a prolific user.

“I’m more tired afterwards than I used to be.” Kali replied as she wiped her hand above her lips and studied the red liquid. “Sometimes I bleed a lot more than normal.”

“The brain hemorrhaging,” he uttered, taking her hand into his and gazing at the blood. “It’ll keep getting worse. I told you, every time we use our powers, a little more damage is done. Drip by drip, our brains are dying.”

“We could stop using...”

“It’s too late for me,” Steven interrupted. “For both of us.” He released her hand. “And besides, you know we could never stop.” He added, smirking at her.

Kali blinked rapidly and averted her gaze. She didn’t want to believe him, but she knew it was all true. A dazzling butterfly suddenly appeared in front of them and Steven stared at it intensely. It was

quite an enchanting sight to behold. So what if it wasn't real?

"And what about Jane?" She asked, sniffing a bit. The butterfly continued to flutter about aimlessly. "Is it too late for her?"

"I don't know," he replied, pondering a bit more. "Maybe, maybe not. She's younger than you but she's using her powers excessively." Steven was well aware of the most recent incidents at the Hawkins Lab. He would be heading back there again soon.

"Are you... Are you going to..." Kali couldn't finish the sentence. Her eyes were getting watery.

"Just ask the question," Steven said quietly as he continued to study the butterfly. It was adorned with some of the most beautiful shades of blue he had ever seen.

"Are... are you going to k-kill her?" The butterfly vanished as Kali tried unsuccessfully to choke back tears.

Steven ran a hand under his own nose, coating it with blood. He missed the butterfly already. Susie would have loved it.

He wrapped an arm around Kali as she leaned into him, sobbing against his chest.

Am I?

El was furious. Hopper had already forbidden her from entering the hospital. "No. Absolutely not!" He yelled as they pursued the ambulance carrying Mike and Nancy. They were approaching the hospital and El's anxiety and anger were palpable.

"Yes, I'm going!" She fired back, fists clenched. "Mike is hurt! A-and Nancy!"

"No, you are not! It's a hospital. It's full of people, strangers. They have security, they have cameras. Who am I supposed to say you are? Huh?" The last twenty-four hours had been beyond chaotic and Hopper was well passed his breaking point. He was in no mood for another argument with El.

"A friend! I'm... I'm his friend!" She said as new tears began to fall down her face. "I p-promised I wouldn't leave him again."

Hopper shook his head back and forth as they pulled into the front lot. "Kid, you're not leaving anyone. Mike and Nancy need medical help and I need to call their parents. I can't watch you and them and make calls at the same time. Understand?"

El did not understand. Two weeks of not seeing Mike. *He was coming to see me.* She thought. *And now he's hurt.* Her breathing was still coming in gasps as she tried to ebb the flow of tears. "When?"

"When what?" Hopper replied, pulling into a spot partially hidden by bushes as he eyed the ambulance entering the drop-off point.

"When can I see him? *Nancy too.* Them?" El asked, her voice quieter than before but still filled with despair.

"Listen, kid," he began. "Let me get everything sorted out with the doctors and their parents and then I'll come back out and we can make a plan, okay?" There was no reply.

"Look, that's the best I can do right now but I promise you'll see them later." He added, after seeing that his initial response didn't improve her demeanor. "Compromise, remember?"

El let out another sniffle as she wiped her tear-streaked face. "Halfway happy..." she finally mumbled. El leaned her head against the window and stared at the imposing building in front of them. It reminded her of the Lab. She hated it.

Hopper sighed as he leaned over and tussled her hair. "I'll be back soon, okay? Wait here and don't do anything stu..." Hopper stopped himself, not wanted to sound callous. "Just stay in the car. Please." El remained silent but nodded faintly.

With another sigh, Hopper exited the vehicle and strode toward the hospital. A million thoughts were racing through his head. Not a single one was pleasant.

“So that’s everything that happened?” Lucas asked. He was sitting next in a chair opposite Will as Dustin continued to pace around the room. Jonathan was alternating between the kitchen and his room, trying to give the friends a little space to talk amongst themselves.

“Yes,” Will replied, feeling like the hour-long interrogation had covered everything at least twice. “That’s all I remember...” The pain in his head and ankle persisted, but the Advil Jonathan gave him was helping a bit. He watched as Dustin continued to walk back and forth in front of them.

“So, we know he knows us. And we know he knows El. And we know we don’t know him. But do we know that El doesn’t know him?” Dustin postulated as he turned towards Lucas once again.

“What?” Lucas asked, completely confused. “Dustin! Would you sit down? You’re driving us crazy!”

“I’m thinking! This is how I think!” Dustin shot back, waving his arms in the air. “We need to talk to El. And Mike. You still can’t reach him?”

Lucas just stared at him. “The Supercom is right there.” He pointed at the device on the table next to him. “I think you would’ve heard Mike if he said something.”

“I hope El’s okay.” Will chimed in. He could tell that Lucas was getting more and more agitated with Dustin by the second. “I wish we could like talk to her somehow.”

“Holy shit!” Dustin exclaimed, startling the others. “Holy shit you guys! That’s it!

“Wha-what’s it?” Lucas asked

“Morse code! Just like Will used to tell us about the Mind Flayer!” Dustin had a huge smile on his face and seemed pretty happy with himself. He didn’t notice Will beginning to sink into the

couch a bit lower at the mention of the monster that had tried to take over his body and mind.

“We can’t just say ‘Hey Eleven, are you safe at your secret hideout’ on the Supercom but we could send a coded message!” Dustin continued.

“Wait, El knows Morse code?” Will had barely interacted with El and still didn’t know that much about her.

Dustin smiled toothily again. “Yeah! Well, maybe. I don’t know... but Mike said El told him that’s how Hopper talks to her when he’s out. She has a radio and like a chart or something. It’ll totally work!”

“No, it totally won’t,” Lucas replied. “We don’t know where she is. She could be miles away! And we don’t know the frequency they use.”

“Oh. Right,” Dustin’s smile disappeared and he finally sat down next to Will. “Shit.”

They sat in silence for minute, just staring at the walls until the ring of the telephone made them all jump in surprise.

“I’ll get it!” They heard Jonathan yell, as he ran down the hall and grabbed the phone. “Hello?” he asked, trying to hide the anxiety in his voice. “Chief? Wha- no, Mom’s at work... WHAT!?”

The boys listened with rapt attention. They could see the color drain from Jonathan’s face as he continued to listen. “Oh my God...” He brought his free hand up to his forehead and started leaning against the wall “Is she okay?...”

Will felt like his heart was going to explode it was beating so fast. *El...please no.*

“No... yea, I understand. What about Mike?” Jonathan continued, but more quietly.

“MIKE!?” Dustin screamed. He and Lucas jumped up and ran towards Jonathan as Will was on the verge of spiraling into a full-blown panic attack.

“WHAT HAPPENED?” Lucas yelled at Jonathan as any anger he still felt toward Mike disappeared in an instant.

“Guys, stop! Hold on,” Jonathan said as they younger boys practically tackled him as they tried to hear what the Chief was saying. “What? Lucas and Dustin... Yeah, they’re here....”

“Tell us what happened!” Dustin interrupted as Jonathan covered his ear with his hand to try to block them out. “Jonathan! C’mon!” Lucas added on.

They couldn’t make out what Hopper was saying, but they knew Mike and someone else were in trouble. Or worse.

“JONATHAN!

“WHAT ABOUT MIKE?”

“IS EL OKAY?”

“IS IT ABOUT EL?”

“WHAT’S THE CHIEF SAYING?”

“TELL US!”

Jonathan couldn’t tell who was saying what as he finished talking to Hopper. “I’m coming now! No... Yes, fine. I’ll drop them off. Okay bye.” He hung up the phone and turned to the two exasperated boys in front of him. However, his attention quickly turned to Will, whose heavy breathing broke up the momentary silence.

“Will?” Jonathan asked as he looked past Dustin and Lucas. He quickly pushed past them and ran to the couch. “Will! It’s alright. Calm down buddy,” he said as he took ahold of his shaking hands.

Will just stared at him as he tried to steady his breathing. “That’s it,” Jonathan continued, “In and out, nice and slow.”

“Wha-what happened? Did s-something bad happen to El? A-and Mike?” Will finally got out.

Jonathan looked up quickly at Dustin and Lucas before returning his focus to Will. “There... there was a car accident. Nancy was driving Mike to the cabin, umm...” He hesitated for a moment. “To the place El is staying with the Chief and they ran off the road...”

“Oh man, oh man, oh man...” Dustin mumbled as grabbed at his hair. Lucas remained silent.

“They’re going to be okay, Will.” Jonathan continued, trying desperately to calm his panic-stricken younger brother. “Chief said Mike and Nancy are both at the hospital resting and their parents are already there, okay?”

“It’s... it’s all my f-fault,” Will gasped, as he began sobbing again. “If I hadn’t left then n-no one would have g-gone looking for me and El and...”

“NO!” Lucas shouted, causing the others to jump and look at him. Even Will’s sobs halted. “It was that fucking...” He glanced at Dustin for a second “...Bizarro Dustin. It’s his fault.” He stared directly into Will’s eyes with an intensity Will had never seen before. “We’re going to find him, Will. And we’re going to make him pay.”

“Yeah we are!” Dustin chimed in. “Real Dustin is gonna kick his as...”

“Guys, calm down,” Jonathan interrupted. “I have to get to the hospital and that means I have to drop you off at your homes.” He looked over Will with his injured foot resting on the table, wondering how he was going to move him without causing more pain. “And I can’t leave Will here so he’ll have to stay with one of you for now.”

“What? We’re all going with you!” Lucas replied. “Mike...”

“No, Chief doesn’t want any more people there right now. Nancy and Mike...” He shuddered thinking about Nancy lying in a hospital bed.

"The doctors need to make sure they're okay first." Jonathan thought maybe he could drop them all off at Lucas's house. *It's right near the Wheeler's...*

"I'm going with you." Their attention returned to Will. "I-I have to see them."

"Will..." Jonathan began but was quickly interrupted.

"Jonathan, please. I need to know they're okay. And, I'm hurt too so you could say you had to make sure I'm alright. My ankle still hurts a bit..." Will spoke quietly but with determination.

Jonathan thought about this for a moment before realizing his makeshift first aid may not have been sufficient. "Okay, yeah. You're right. You should get looked at too. But you guys," He turned to Dustin and Lucas. "You have to go straight home. Understand?"

The friends glanced at each other. A silent agreement was made between them instantly. "Yeah, sure. We have our bikes here anyway, so we'll ride home. Right, Lucas?" Dustin said.

Lucas nodded. "Yeah, fine. But we're still going to the hospital later!"

Jonathan looked relieved. "Good. And I'll talk to the Chief and we'll figure it out. C'mon Will, let's get you in the car."

Once Will was situated in the backseat, the boys all said their goodbyes with promises to meet up later on. Dustin and Lucas watched as the brothers disappeared down long driveway. Once the car was out of view, they walked over to their bikes.

"Do you really want to go there?" Lucas asked, feeling just the slightest bit nervous.

"Where else would he be?" Dustin replied, pulling his hat further down his head.

The two friends exchanged a final, knowing glance before leaving the Byers residence. It wasn't long before they had to abandon their bikes and continue the journey on foot. They walked through the forest in

relative silence, the only sound emanating from the snow crunching below their boots.

After a while, their destination came into view. It was a large, foreboding yet desolate structure surrounded by a tall chain link fence: The Hawkins Department of Energy.

Lucas spoke first as they approached the front entrance. "The gate!" He gasped, running forward. "It's... it's unlocked and open." Lucas spun around and beckoned at Dustin, but Dustin remained motionless.

He was staring at something behind Lucas. Something beyond the gate.

Lucas slowly turned toward the lab once more. "Oh shit."

Notes for the Chapter:

Hey look, it's Kali! I knew I was going to include her at some point. So, brain hemorrhaging is bad m'kay? I don't care what universe a character is in, blood coming out your nose, ears, eyes etc. is never a good thing. Ever see the movie "The Butterfly Effect"? Same principal. There's a price to pay for psychic powers and I truly believe these subjects would not live long lives if they continued to use them. I'm really enjoying writing for Steven/Seven... Definitely much more of him going forward as we approach the eventual climax.

Oh, so that Morse code part? Lucas's explanation as to why Dustin's plan wasn't going to work was basically verbatim what I thought in my head as I wrote out the idea. I left it in because I liked the thought of it, but that would have involved a lot of complex radio work ha. I went with a phone call.

I hope everyone enjoys this chapter. I have most of 8

written - I actually took part of 7 out to put into 8 so everything would flow better - so hopefully that will be released next week. Unfortunately, April gets crazy busy for me after that so we'll see about the remaining three chapters. I hope to finish before May, but we shall see.

Thank you for reading and for the nice comments, the kudos, bookmarks, subscriptions, etc. I'm writing this for you!

8. Good Knight

Summary for the Chapter:

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was trying to will his mind to stay focused on what was happening. He knew there was no way he could fight back if attacked.

*Expectations were high for poor little Nine,
They all celebrated his reading of minds,
His focus perfected by making him blind,
But the edge of the roof he was able to find.*

“Ugghhh... owwww... whaa?” Mike awoke very confused and in pain. His eyes weren’t fully cooperating so he rubbed them with his hands. It took some more blinking before the realization set in that he was not in his room. His room wasn’t this clean. Or white. And it didn’t smell like a hospital...

The memory of what had happened suddenly flooded back into his brain. Mike shot up from the bed and instantly regretted the decision as his head throbbed in protest. “OWW, SHIT. WHAT THE FUCK!?” He yelled as he saw stars.

“MICHAEL!”

Someone shouted his name and he slowly turned his head towards the female voice. His Mother was standing in the doorway, coffee in hand. She looked more disheveled than usual and tired. And possibly just a bit angry after that outburst.

“Don’t use that kind of language, young man,” Mrs. Wheeler scolded as she rushed to her injured son’s bedside. “How are you feeling? How’s your head? Do you need some water?” Her tone quickly becoming far gentler.

Mike was still groggy and in too much pain to process all the questions. “Umm... it hurts. Uhh... yeah I guess I’m okay... Wait, where’s Nancy!?” Mike asked, suddenly very awake and in a panic. “Is she alright? We were driving and, and...” He hesitated. “And we crashed...”

“Nancy will be fine, don’t worry,” his mom responded, a bit unconvincingly. “She just has a bad cut on her forehead but she’s awake. The doctor said she’ll be alright.” Mrs. Wheeler brought a hand to Mike’s head and slowly guided him back down on the pillow. Her ears were misty.

“We were so worried about you both. When Jim called me I...” She had screamed into the phone as she was told by the Chief of Police that her oldest children were in the hospital after crashing into a ditch. “I guess I thought the worst.” A tear escaped Mrs. Wheeler’s eye as she brushed some of her son’s messy hair from his face.

“I-I’m sorry Mom,” Mike said, feeling the emotions building up inside of him. “It’s... it’s all my fault. I made Nancy drive me...” The tears were welling up, dangerously close to pouring from his eyes.

“No, Michael. It’s no one’s fault. Accidents happen and the only thing we care about is that you’re both safe and that...”

“Wait, where’s Dad?” Mike interrupted his Mom as he gazed around the room, seeing no one else.

Mrs. Wheeler tensed up at the mention of her husband. “He’s... checking on the car. He wanted to see what the damage was.”

Mike’s tears dried up instantly. “The car? Wha-what about us? Doesn’t he care about our damage!?” He practically yelled as he shifted up in bed again. Once again, he had made a painful mistake. “OWWW, DAMN IT!”

“Michael! You need to rest your head. And of course he cares. He was here, uhhm, earlier.” What she didn’t say is that he was only there for a few minutes. Once the doctor said his children would be fine, minus a likely scar on Nancy’s forehead, he changed the topic of conversation to his car.

The doctor was, unsurprisingly to everyone except Ted, unable to provide him with a status on the vehicle so he took off, leaving his wife to deal with the kids. Luckily, Holly was on a playdate so Karen didn’t have to look after her as well.

Mike didn’t push the issue. It wasn’t his Mom’s fault and she was already upset enough because of what happened to him and Nancy. *Nancy!* His thoughts returned to his sister.

“Can I see Nancy?” He asked, changing the subject.

“You need to rest for now, honey. And so does she. You’ll see her soon, okay?” His Mother patted her eyes with a napkin as she spoke, trying to regain her composure. “So where were you two going so early? None of your friends live around that area,” she asked.

Mike’s mind started to race. *I can’t tell her about the cabin. I can’t tell her about the El. I can’t tell her about anything!*

“Umm, so...” Mike began without really knowing what say.

“Mrs. Wheeler?” A voice said behind them. They both turned to look towards the doorway as a nurse walked in. “Chief Hopper is with your daughter and would like you to join them. It’s time for Michael to take some pain medicine anyway.”

“Oh, alright then,” Mrs. Wheeler replied. “Will you be okay on your own for a while, honey?” She ran a hand through his hair again as she spoke.

“Uhh, yea. Yea, of course. Just... just tell Nancy I’m fine and I’ll come see her soon, okay?” Mike was relieved his mother’s interrogation was quickly interrupted. He hoped that Nancy had already worked out a cover story. She was a much better liar than him.

“Of course, dear. I’ll be back to check on you soon.” Mrs. Wheeler

squeezed his hand a final time before walking out of the room.

“This will help with the pain, and help you sleep.” The nurse explained to Mike as she readied a needle. “Best to just close your eyes and relax as you may feel a bit dizzy at first.” Mike winced as the needle penetrated his arm. “There, all done,” she said as she pulled it out and placed a small band aid over the puncture.

“Uhh thanks...” Mike replied, already feeling a bit tingly.

“Just press that button next to your bed if you need anything. Now get some rest, Michael.” The nurse shut off the bright overhead light as she left the room and closed the door behind her.

The pain in Mike’s head was already starting to dull. His entire body seemed to relax as the drugs coursed through his veins. His sadness for Nancy and anger at his Dad began to dissipate. His worry for El...
El!

Mike fought the cloudiness of his mind. *I saw her! She was there. Is she alright?* He thought as he tried to lift his arm and rub his eyes again. Unfortunately, that action was proving far more difficult than he had anticipated. “Errggh, stupid... arm... why won’t you work...” he mumbled as his eyes fluttered before closing.

“Stop embarrassing yourself, Mike.”

Mike’s eyes shot back open as his barely-aloft arm dropped back down onto the bed. His recently relaxed body tensed up as a rush of adrenaline worked to revive him from his disoriented state.

“I guess I should apologize,” the unknown voice continued. “I wasn’t expecting the cavalry to arrive so quickly. Although, you like to play the hero, don’t you? A valiant knight on his way to rescue Rapunzel from her ivory tower?”

Mike’s heart began to race and his breath was coming in gasps as he slowly looked around the room, trying to identify the source of the words. His vision was blurry and his grip on consciousness was still tenuous at best.

“But I guess in this case it was more ‘love-sick, middle-school nerd

being driven by his sister to check on his maybe girlfriend who lives in a tiny cabin in the woods and happens to have super powers and fights her own battles.’ Or something like that. Right?”

Mike closed his eyes and took a deep breath. He was trying to will his mind to stay focused on what was happening. He knew there was no way he could fight back if attacked.

“It was never my intention to hurt you. Or Nancy. You’re all just...” The stranger paused for moment as he contemplated his next words. “You know chess, right? Wait, of course you do. Look who I’m talking to,” he added, breaking into laughter.

Mike *did* know how to play chess and was pretty good at it. For a brief moment, his fear was replaced by anger at the apparent slight.

“So, people like your parents and the kids at your school and all the other clueless idiots in this town and throughout the country: They’re the Pawns.” The stranger continued, as he walked towards Mike. “Mindlessly wandering around with minimal importance. They’re weak and easily disposable. And forgettable. Does the name Barb ring a bell?”

Mike finally opened his eyes and turned his numb head. The person was now standing next to his bed. At last, Mike had a face to put to the voice.

“Then you have the Rooks. Strong, determined. Maybe not the brightest but rigid in their resolve. They move along the straight and narrow and are completely focused on the task at hand. A figure of authority. Your pal Chief Hopper, for example.”

Mike didn’t recognize the unwanted guest. He looked relatively young but was dressed in a suit which made Mike feel even more intimidated and uneasy. *How did he get in here?* He thought, as his vision continued to go in and out of focus.

“Moving on to the Knights. Brave, loyal and crafty. Used properly, they can take the enemy by surprise and deal devastating blows on the battlefield. That’s who you try to imitate, Mike. You and your party of misfits.” He smiled. “Even your sister and those other guys.

Though to be fair, you fought well over the last year. I give you all a lot of credit for surviving this long.”

Mike’s confusion only continued to grow. *How does he know so much about us?* He wanted to say something but his face felt all tingly and weird and his mouth was refusing to work properly.

“And who can forget about the Bishops?” The stranger’s smile vanished as quickly as it had appeared. “So cunning and cruel. They slice through their adversaries like a knife and wield their power with blatant disregard for the survival of others. Does that sound like anyone you’ve encountered? Perhaps a certain old, white-haired man and his band of mad scientists?”

Mike could hear the hatred in his voice. Even in the relative darkness, he could see the visitor’s bright eyes flicker. But he knew the man being referred to: Dr. Brenner. The contemptible scientist who had kept El locked away her entire life. Who had abused her so terribly.

He’s not one of them, Mike thought. This realization made him feel only slightly less afraid.

“We now find ourselves in the presence of the Queen,” the visitor continued as he began to pace back and forth a bit. “Fearless and unparalleled in power. She dominates the playing field, causing destruction wherever she goes. The other pieces try in vain to control or vanquish her. I think you know who fits that description, lover boy.”

Mike’s barely functioning mind focused its thoughts on Eleven. El. The girl who escaped her captors and defeated monsters. Who had saved him on multiple occasions. And Will. And everyone, really. *He knows about her too.*

“And last, but certainly not least, the King. Maybe not the most physically powerful but undoubtedly the most important figure. Arrogant, selfish, obstinate, power-hungry, unsympathetic to the plight of those around him. Those are qualities frequently attributed to Kings.” He paused as he turned to meet Mike’s stare. Mike’s eyes were barely half open.

“But Kings are the decision makers, Mike. And every decision has consequences. Sometimes good, sometimes bad. There are times when a pawn must be sacrificed for the greater good. The Rooks and Knights must fight and even die when required. It’s their sworn duty. And those conniving Bishops? Why even they’re simply a means to an end.”

Mike knew he only had another minute left in him. He summoned the last of his strength and willpower to stay awake.

“Even our precious Queen, Mikey. Even she isn’t immune to the will of a King.” He stopped moving, standing stoic at the side of the hospital bed. “Every piece has a purpose. Once that purpose is fulfilled, it becomes expendable.”

The stranger bent down and Mike could practically feel the intensity of the blue eyes as his own were darkening. The blackness was beckoning him.

“This game is nearing its end, Mike,” he continued. “None of you were supposed to get involved, but you did. So now it’s time for all of you to decide whether or not to keep playing or save yourselves.”

He brought his head even closer to Mike’s and whispered in his ear. “You were born pawns and you should have stayed pawns. Just let the Queens and the Kings fight their own battles.”

Game... save yourselves... pawns... battles... Mike tried to understand it all. “Eleven...” was all he managed to mumble before his head sunk deeper into the pillow and his eyes closed shut.

Steven watched as Mike finally succumbed to the drugs. He had tried his best to remove some of the pieces from play. *For their own good*, he believed. However, he knew Mike would never abandon Eleven. And neither would the rest of her friends and family. It was quite evident how much they loved her.

You’re no different than him, Steven’s mind told him. *I don’t care.*

He sighed heavily as he heard the sound of voices growing louder in the hallway. “Sweet dreams, Mike. Don’t let the bed bugs...”

The door opened and Mrs. Wheeler and Chief Hopper walked into the room. They observed a sleeping Mike and nothing more. After a moment, they turned and left, closing the door quietly behind them.

“...bite.”

Dustin's initial shock wore off and he hurried to catch up to Lucas who had already made his way into the compound. He shuddered as he passed the gatehouse as painful memories flooded back into his mind.

Lucas came to a stop and Dustin moved to his side. They both stared at the sign stuck into a pile of snow in the middle of the road. The writing on it was a bit sloppy but still legible.

Welcome home, Jane!

Tour begins Eleven pm 12/17

Bring any dates, goodbye Eight

“That's blood,” Dustin said, stepping even closer to the sign. “Lucas, it's written in blood!”

Lucas's eyes darted around the area quickly. “Shhh! Keep it down,” he whispered. “He could be anywhere.” Lucas wished the rest of the party was with them. *What if there are more than just one?* He thought to himself.

“Son of a bitch, son of a bitch! He knows about all of us! He even knows El's real name!” Dustin said in panic, remembering Mike had told them that her birth name was Jane Ives. “And what does he

mean by ‘*Bring any dates, goodbye Eight!*?’ Who the Hell is Eight? We gotta go back and tell the others!”

A part of Lucas wanted to continue towards the building, but they were woefully unprepared. They had left their homes in such a hurry that he didn’t even remember to grab his wrist rocket.

“That’s Monday night,” Lucas said mostly to himself. “We’ve got time prepare. Do you think he’s watching us right now?” He asked, gazing up at the darkened building.

“I hope so,” Dustin replied, trying to sound braver than he felt. “You may have won this battle Bizarro Dustin, but you’ll never win the war!” He raised a clenched fist into the air as he spoke, in an apparent act of defiance.

“Battle? What battle? What are you even...? Never mind,” Lucas replied as he shook his head back and forth. “C’mon, let’s get out of here. It’s a long walk back.” He turned and started trudging toward the gate. Dustin, having come out of his warrior stance, followed suit a moment later.

As they left, snowflakes began to fall from the sky once again. Dustin couldn’t help but think that normally, this would have been a perfect day to sit at home, buried under a pile of blankets. Maybe he would’ve even been sipping some hot cocoa with marshmallows by the fire.

Unfortunately, this had been yet another disastrous and traumatic day for him and most of his friends. What was worse, he had a sinking feeling that this was only the beginning of something much worse.

The stacks of papers on his desk were growing higher and higher by the hour. Each passing day brought more turmoil to him and the entire Department. He had survived the investigations so far, but

many of his colleagues had not. And if that wasn't bad enough, not a single one of the test subjects was currently in their possession.

"I told you, Jack, my hands are tied," Dr. Pfeiffer said, holding the telephone loosely against his ear. The man on the other end of the line continued to beg for help. "Listen. No, listen to me. There's nothing I can do. You understood the risks when you joined the team..." He despised wasting time and this call was the epitome of that.

The sudden opening of the office door caught the old man off guard. "Jack, I have to go. Goodbye," he said curtly as he slammed the phone back onto the receiver. "Paris convention, 1979. Who was the keynote speaker?"

"Dr. Andre Pichot," the man replied quickly. These precautionary questions were necessary after recent events.

"What is it, Maddox? Can't you see I'm busy? This ship may be sinking but I will keep the band playing until the very end!"

Colonel Maddox chuckled as he sat down in front of the messy desk. "I never thought I'd see the day when you'd be so pessimistic about the project"

"What project? Do you see a project anymore!?" Dr. Pfeiffer shouted as he shoved a stack of papers off of his desk and onto the floor. "Even if we could locate Seven and Eight, they wouldn't cooperate no matter what we did to them. You know that." He sighed as he lifted his glasses and rubbed his tired eyes. "If only Eleven was..."

"Still alive?" The Colonel interrupted, grinning at the old man.

Dr. Pfeiffer froze. Slowly, he returned his glasses to his eyes and stared at the military man who rarely expressed happiness. That was especially true since the incident at the Hawkins facility earlier in the month. "What have you found?" He asked quietly.

The Colonel opened his briefcase and removed a manila folder. He tossed it onto the disorganized desk, disturbing even more papers. "Open it."

The folder contained numerous documents of various types. There were topographical charts, graphs and paragraphs of analysis. "Seismograph reports? Where are these fr..." He stopped short as he read the name of the location at the bottom of the page: Hawkins, Indiana.

"Detections of an isolated seismic event measuring 4.2 on the Richter scale early Saturday morning. Quite unusual for a location with no previous seismic events over 1.6 in recent history," the Colonel explained. "And within ten miles of a Department of Energy facility. But not just any ordinary facility. Quite the coincidence, wouldn't you say, Doctor?"

"Eleven!" Dr. Pfeiffer gasped, as he looked up at the Colonel. "She must still be alive! Was there a sighting? Any witnesses?" His mind was racing as he began flipping through more pages of the dossier.

"Yes, something like that," Maddox began. "If you'd be so kind as to turn your attention to the end of the report I think you'll find answers to all of your questions."

Dr. Pfeiffer turned the penultimate page and was confronted by a puzzling sight: A small plastic bag with a postcard inside was paper clipped to the top of the folder. The front of it displayed a scenic view with the words "Greetings from Hawkins, Indiana" plastered across the middle.

"It arrived this morning," the Colonel continued. "Read the back. He hasn't lost his sense of humor."

Dr. Pfeiffer carefully unclipped the bag and turned it over, revealing a message on the back of the postcard:

What's up, Doc?

Congrats on avoiding prison! You must be sooo happy. I'd love for you & your friends to come visit me so we can celebrate in person, just like in the good 'ol days. How about this: You bring a knife & I'll bring a cake with Eleven candles on it. We can blow them out together & see if our wishes

come true! Midnight, 12/18. No presents for early birds. I'll be watching.

P.S. Tell the Colonel I'm sorry for borrowing his body. I hope you guys didn't torture him too badly afterwards.

XOXOXO

Steven

Dr. Pfeiffer read the message twice before turning the postcard back over and folding his hands in front of him. He stared at the Colonel as he processed this information. A minute of silence passed before he finally spoke. "We need to assemble a team immediately. Eleven must be recovered."

"Do you really want to play Seven's game?" Maddox asked, sounding annoyed. He had avoided aggressive interrogation due to his rank. However, the higher-ups had still kept him locked up in a cell for two days as they conducted an investigation after the destruction of the majority of the project files. The Colonel had not been amused.

"What choice do we have?" Dr. Pfeiffer replied. "You heard they aren't approving any further acquisitions. Without test subjects there is no project. Without a project, there's no me. Without me there's no you. "

Maddox glared at him. It was no secret that much of his rise through the ranks was due in large part to Dr. Pfeiffer. He also wondered how long his current immunity would last. The Congressional inquiries were not going away. "Fine. A small team, heavily armed, clandestine. I can have them ready to leave by 1100. They'll be in position by 1600. Plenty of time to recon before insertion."

"Good. Make sure there's an extra seat for you too, Colonel. We're in this together. Once we neutralize Seven, for good this time, we'll retrieve Eleven and continue what we started." Dr. Pfeiffer began to rummage through another tower of papers as he spoke.

"If Seven's telling the truth, of course," Maddox replied.

“Oh, I believe he’s being completely honest. And that should worry you even more,” Dr. Pfeiffer added quickly.

He watched as Colonel Maddox smirked before rising out of his chair and exiting the room without another word. The postcard remained in its plastic prison, lying on the disorganized desk. He reached for it again and turned it over in his hands as he studied the red writing.

“Oh Seven, still playing your games. When will you learn?” He mumbled aloud, while leaning back in his chair and glancing at the digital clock on the far wall. It read 7:11am.

Dr. Pfeiffer couldn’t help but laugh.

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, so it's been longer than usual since I've posted. There's a lot going on in my life right now and I've been rewriting a lot of stuff. The next week is also chaos so I'm not sure if I'll get another chapter out until late April. I'll try my best! I'm also trying to write longer chapters, which means they're taking longer to write. It amazes me how some people on here are able to crank out 10k chapters for their stories every few weeks. I tip my hat to them.

So, some pieces are finally coming together. Just like the best TV shows, there has been a lot of buildup the last few episodes. I think it's obvious that a major confrontation is going to take place in Hawkins very soon, with all the players involved. I have most of it outlined, but I could still change a few things around. I'm really torn about a few characters... I'm sure it'll work out just fine for most of them ha.

Thank you as always for reading and I hope you enjoy this latest installment. I'm going to bed.

9. Party Planners

Summary for the Chapter:

The hospital room was quiet and bleak. A machine in the corner was making a beeping sound, but beyond that was silence. El shuttered as she stepped into the darkness, closing the door behind her. It took a moment before her eyes adjusted and focused on the body lying on the nearby bed.

The sole volunteer, he was called Ten,

Broke things apart again and again,

They sent him away to try that on men,

He returned home in pieces, a puzzling end.

Eight had escaped.

The alarms continued to blare as the sounds of hurried footsteps and angry voices filled the hallways. Men in white lab coats intermingled with armed guards rushed about as the entire facility devolved into chaos. A search party had already been dispatched and helicopters were on the way to join the hunt.

They were furious. But so was he.

Why are we letting her leave? Why does she get to live and you don't? He hadn't understood why. But it wasn't up to him. The decision was final.

It wasn't long before his door was thrown open and two burly men entered the room. Without even a word, they began beating him

relentlessly with metal batons. He wasn't at all surprised by the assault. In actuality, he found the attack quite hilarious since he honestly had nothing to do with the escape. His laughter only encouraged the men to strike him harder.

"Enough," a sinister voice said. The duo took one last swing apiece before backing away from the bloodied body on the cold, concrete floor.

"Marty!" Steven said, still chuckling even after his bludgeoning. "You came to visit me!" He turned so his entire body was facing the doorway. "I'd get up and give you a big hug but I think one of my legs may be broken. Your loss," he added, spitting some blood on to the floor.

"Where is she?" Dr. Martin Brenner asked without the slightest trace of emotion on his face.

"Where's *who*?" Steven asked in amusement as he attempted to sit up against the wall. "Oh no! Did you lose *another* test subject? Wow, you guys really suck at this, huh?"

"I won't ask you again, Seven," Dr. Brenner continued as he stepped over the threshold and into the tiny cell.

Steven simply stared at the malicious man and smiled. "Yes, you will. You'll ask and you'll ask but I'll never answer. Mostly because I don't know, but also because fuck you. Oh, and my name is Steven."

Dr. Brenner said nothing for a moment before smiling ever so slightly. "We've been over this many times before. Your name is Seven. You're just a number and nothing more. You never were anything else and you'll never be anything other than that." His smile grew larger. "Just like your friend Four."

Steven closed his eyes and an instant he was standing before Dr. Brenner in his preferred form. Bow tie and all. "DO NOT CALL HER THAT!" He screamed as the guards moved towards his physical body.

Dr. Brenner waved them off as he observed the vision in front of him.

"Very good Seven. The defects in your projection are almost imperceptible."

"It's Steven. Well, your flaws are quite visible, *Marty*," Steven said as he transformed once again. Dr. Brenner was now staring at himself as if looking into a mirror. "Viola! Gaze upon your own hideous visage. For only a *monstrous* man such as yourself could do such *monstrous* things to others."

"Clever. It's a shame that you've always been so uncooperative, Seven..." Dr. Brenner began.

"Steven," his counterpart replied.

"We could have accomplished great things together," the real Dr. Brenner continued. "Unfortunately, you have proven that you will never comply. Therefore, your existence is no longer necessary"

"What a pity," Steven replied, as his form morphed back into the handsome teenager he could have been. "I'd tell you to blow me, but... well, you know," he said as he turned away from the doctor and walked back towards the broken and bloodied body of a mutilated boy. "Are we done here?"

"Yes, we're done. This will be our last meeting, Seven." Dr. Brenner was happy to be done with him.

"Steven," the boy interjected once again.

"You're no longer my problem."

"Yea? It seems like you're running out of problems at an alarming rate, Doc. What, now with Nine dead and Eight gone missing. *Tsk tsk*, sir. You best keep a close eye on Eleven," Steven said as he studied his true form. He watched the blood trickling down from the open wounds. It was morbidly fascinating.

Dr. Brenner's eyes twitched at the mention of the Department's most promising subject. She was the daughter of a woman with proven psychic abilities. Although just six years old, Eleven's incredible prowess was undeniable. "You're correct, Seven..."

“Steven,” the boy whispered, not paying much attention to the visitors anymore.

“...that there are few problems like yourself remaining. Coincidentally, I was just informed today that one of our facilities is being closed down permanently,” he continued.

“Is that so?” Steven mumbled, as he reached for himself. His hand passed through the corporeal body without impediment. He wished that he would finally be free of this torturous existence. But that was not to be. He would endure. For years.

“Unfortunately, my colleagues there were unable to make any further progress with their final subject. Such a stubborn girl...” Dr. Brenner trailed off as he turned around and began to leave. “I hope you had a chance to say goodbye to her.”

Steven’s eyes opened as he gasped for breath. His entire body was burning with pain and he could barely move. He was now covered in even more blood due to his recent activity. “Would you...” He swallowed hard and took another breath as his vision blurred. “Would you like to know how you’re going to die, Doctor Brenner?” He asked, forcing his head up so his bright blue eyes would be visible even in the darkness of his cell.

Dr. Brenner stopped in the doorway but didn’t turn around. “Goodbye, Seven,” was all that he said. Those would be the last words he would ever speak to his most troublesome of test subjects. The guards followed him out and slammed the door shut behind them without another glance at their victim.

“My... name... is... Steven,” the boy slurred as his head dropped and his body slid further down the wall. There was always peace in unconsciousness.

He dreamt only of her.

Hopper glanced at the clock in the hallway nervously. He knew every passing minute meant the chance of El disobeying his request and entering the hospital on her own increased exponentially. He hadn't planned for any additional delay, but the arrival of Jonathan with an apparently injured Will changed everything.

"What the Hell happened to him!?" Hopper demanded, feeling even more overwhelmed.

"I-I'm fine," Will said quickly as fear grew inside him. "I uhh... just tripped outside and umm... twisted my ankle bad and hit my head," he continued while avoiding the Chief's gaze. He gave Jonathan a brief but pleading look, hoping his brother wouldn't reveal the truth.

"Yeah. Yeah, he fell in the woods. That's all," Jonathan replied, deciding this was neither the time nor the place to discuss what really happened that morning. Also, he could tell that Hopper was beyond exasperated. "But what about Nancy and Mike? Can I see them after I take care of Will?"

"For Christ's sake, kid," Hopper grumbled, his focus still on the small boy. "Of all the days..." He trailed off as he rubbed his tired eyes and sighed. "Nancy and Mike are alright. They'll make a full recovery. But they're resting and they need to keep resting for now. *Alone*," he emphasized, before Jonathan was able to object.

Jonathan was disappointed that he couldn't visit them but relieved to hear once again that his brother's friend and his... *friend* were okay. "Hear that, Will? Just like I told you, they're fine," he said softly to his brother.

Will gave a silent nod as he looked away, eyes shiny with tears threatening to escape. Jonathan was still carrying him and the older boy's arms were starting to get tired. Hopper seemed to take notice of that fact.

"Alright, let's get Will checked in. And you're in a hospital remember? They do have wheelchairs here you know," Hopper said as he strode over to the wall and grabbed one. He couldn't believe that Joyce's youngest son was once again in need of medical attention. *She's going to lose her Goddamn mind*, he thought.

Jonathan carefully placed Will into the wheelchair and began pushing him towards the front desk. Hopper was walking next to him, still visibly irritated by this latest predicament. "Does Joyce..." He cut himself short. "Does your mother know yet?" He asked, hoping he didn't have to make another unpleasant phone call today.

"Uhh, no. We...I didn't call her," Jonathan replied. He knew that was probably wrong but it was too late to change that decision now. "She's at work and I thought maybe it was just a sprain but then you called about Nancy and Mike and since I was already coming here..."

"I get it," Hopper interrupted with a wave of his hand. "Okay, here's what we're going to do. You're going to check Will in and then come back to the lobby once he's in a room. I'll call your mother and tell her what's going on and then wait with you here, got it?"

"Yeah, okay but..." Jonathan began before being cut off once again.

"But nothing. You are not going to go searching for Nancy or Mike," Hopper said firmly. "Once your mother gets here I'll check on Mike and Nancy again and then we can talk, okay?" He stared at the brothers intently but didn't wait for a response. "Good. Now go."

Hopper looked up at the clock above the reception desk. It was only 11:43am. "What a fucking morning..." He mumbled to himself. He walked over to the same phone he had used earlier and dialed Joyce's work number from memory. *This is going to be fun.*

It was well past *later*. At least it was in her opinion.

Chief Hopper had finally returned and was extremely relieved to find El, albeit an extremely annoyed El, still residing within the safe confines of his vehicle. He entered the driver's side door and sat down on the seat with a heavy sigh. He knew she was staring at him the entire time.

“Okay, listen kid...” Hopper began, but those were the only words he was able to get out before El opened her door and leapt out of the car. “No! Kid, wait! Stop!” He exclaimed as watched her sprint towards the hospital. For some strange reason, his door wasn’t opening no matter how hard he pushed against it... “DAMN IT, EL!”

El was fed up with waiting and didn’t care who saw her. She needed to see *him*. Not later. Now. And no one was going to stop her. She wiped away a tiny drop of blood from under her nose before taking a deep breath and opening the hospital door.

A familiar smell attacked her nostrils and El shuddered under the bright fluorescent lights. This place reminded her of the lab. She tried to reassure herself that a hospital was a good place. It wasn’t working. *Where are you, Mike?*

“Eleven!?”

El froze in place at the mention of her name. Panic filled her body as she spun around and raised her arm defensively. Luckily, that fear was short lived as Jonathan Byers approached her from the waiting area. El immediately lowered her arm and took a breath. “Jonathan?” She asked in hushed voice.

“How did you get here?” Jonathan asked, remembering Will’s account of the morning and El’s apparent disappearance. *Maybe she really did run off.*

“Came with Hopper. Where’s Mike? And Nancy?” She asked hurriedly, knowing that Hopper was probably out of the car by now. Her gaze shifted between Jonathan and the entrance.

“I-I don’t know. I only got here...”

“Please! I have to see Mike! Please,” El begged as she looked around the room, trying to decide which direction to head in.

Jonathan could see the sadness and concern on her face. He too felt that same way about Nancy. *And Mike*, he reminded himself again. *But Nancy...*

“Okay, let me think,” Jonathan said as glanced at the elevators next

to them. He and the nurse had brought Will to the third floor. She had made an offhand comment about there being a lot of kids coming in this morning and that a lot of rooms were occupied by people with the flu. It was apparently a bad year for it. *Not important*, Jonathan thought as he racked his brain for clues.

Once Will was settled in bed another nurse had come in and asked her colleague about the location of one of the doctors. *Just upstairs*, she had said. Then something about two patients that came in together. *Siblings...*

“Fourth floor,” Jonathan blurted out suddenly. “They must be on the fourth floor. C’mon we can take the elevator.” He pressed the call button and an elevator chimed as doors opened in front of them. They both walked in and turned around just as Hopper burst through the entrance door.

Jonathan pushed the fourth-floor button and the doors began to close as Hopper’s eyes turned in their direction. He gasped but El didn’t react at all. The last thing Jonathan saw was the furious expression on the Chief’s face before the doors closed shut.

“Oh God, he’s going to kill me,” Jonathan said as the elevator began to rise. His heart was beating rapidly and he was beginning to sweat.

“No. I won’t let him. I promise,” El said, looking up at Jonathan and giving him a quick, small smile. “Thank you for helping me.”

Jonathan returned the smile. “You’re welcome. And I’ll hold you to that promise.” He could see why Mike liked this girl so much. She was kind, caring, brave and protective of her friends. *Just like Nancy*, he thought to himself.

The elevator chimed again and the doors opened, revealing the fourth floor. The pair exited quickly and made their way down the hallway toward the patient rooms. They were both anxious about what they would find.

“Jesus Christ, we have... we have to take a break!” Dustin said between heavy breaths. He and Lucas had made it back to their bicycles and were speeding down yet another long road. The layer of snow on the ground wasn’t making the journey any easier.

Lucas had somehow convinced him to ride to Max’s house since she was the only member of the Party currently unaccounted for today. They knew that if something had indeed happened to El, the Chief would have told Jonathan.

“Would you shut up!” Lucas replied, sick of Dustin’s whining. “We’re almost there.” He wouldn’t admit it to Dustin, but his legs were starting to hurt as well. He had forgotten how far away Max lived from them.

“Son of a bitch!” Dustin yelled as he continued to complain. “When I have a heart attack, we’re just going to wind up at the hospital anyway so we might as well go there now!” It sounded like solid reasoning to him. Lucas just gritted his teeth and tried to ignore him.

Several minutes of complaining later, Max’s residence finally came into view. Their bikes skidded to a halt on the sidewalk out front and Dustin immediately collapsed onto a pile of snow. “Oh my God... that... that was the worst experience of my life.” He exclaimed as he placed a gloved-hand over his rapidly beating heart.

“Seriously!?” Lucas screamed. He had finally reached his breaking point. “What, a long bike ride? Exercise?” He threw his bike on the ground and stomped angrily towards Dustin. “This is the worst thing that’s ever happened to you? Not being hunted by demo-dogs or the Government or the freaking Demogorgon itself!?”

Dustin was a bit taken aback by his friend’s outburst. “Uhh, well, no. Obviously those were...”

Lucas didn’t let him finish. “And now there’s someone or something that’s attacking Will and Mike and Nancy and is after Eleven and all you’re doing is complaining the whole time!”

“What? I wasn’t... We didn’t need to waste time riding here, Lucas!” Dustin had finally caught his breath and was ready to defend himself. “We could’ve stopped at my house and you could have called your *girlfriend* from...”

“Will you two shut up!” A voice said from behind them. “I could hear you idiots from the backyard. You’re lucky I’m the only one home!”

Lucas and Dustin turned on the spot and observed a clearly annoyed Max walking in their direction. She was bundled up in a thick winter jacket and gloves and her fiery red hair was almost completely hidden by a giant wool hat. But even with all the layers on, she still looked like she was freezing.

“Max!” Lucas gasped as he ran over to her. “Hey, how are you?” He asked with a toothy smile, momentarily forgetting the purpose of their visit.

“What are you doing here, Stalker?” Max replied, ignoring his question. “And what are you two nerds yelling about? Something about Will and Mike?” She lost her train of thought after hearing Dustin call her Lucas’s girlfriend. He hadn’t officially asked her out, but she was hoping he would soon. Regardless, Max was trying really hard to suppress a smile.

“Hey! Watch who you’re calling a nerd, MADMAX!” Dustin replied as he began wiping the snow off his jacket and pants.

“Look, umm... some things happened this morning and I... I mean, we, wanted to make sure you’re okay,” Lucas said as he stepped closer to Max.

“*Make sure I’m okay?*” Max repeated. “Wait, what happened? Where are the others? And why didn’t you just call me?”

“THANK YOU!” Dustin yelled as he threw his arms into the air.

“DUSTIN! SHUT UP!” Lucas fired back as his face began to flush. The combination of Dustin’s antics and being in the presence of Max was getting to be too much for him to handle. “It’s... it’s kind of a long story. Umm, do you think we could go inside?” He asked as a cold

gust of wind blew through.

Max contemplated the situation for a moment. She was indeed home alone, but that wouldn't last forever. Although her brother, Billy, was staying out of her way these days, she didn't want to risk further confrontation over Lucas.

"Fine, you can come in," she said at last. "But we can't stay here long, alright? I don't need any more bullshit in my life right now."

"Yea, okay. Sure, that's cool. Thank you!" Lucas stammered as his smile returned. He found himself lost in her eyes as they stood so close to each other. He was already feeling warmer.

"Sooo are we going in or are you two just going to keep staring at each other," Dustin said, breaking up the silence.

Max smirked as she flipped Dustin off and began walking back to her house. "C'mon nerds, let's make this quick."

Lucas glared at Dustin one last time before running to catch up to Max.

"Oh, and do you think you could make us some hot chocolate with marshmallows? I could really go for a cup!" Dustin asked as he trudged behind the pair. This time, they both flipped him off.

It didn't take long to locate Mike and Nancy's rooms. Jonathan had exaggerated his relationship with Nancy to a passing nurse who pointed them in the right direction. Normally, that would have intrigued El, but she was too worried about Mike to think about it. Jonathan even had to grab ahold of El's shoulder to stop her from breaking out in a run once the location was obtained.

El found herself standing outside a closed door as Jonathan continued down the hall to see Nancy. "Promise me you'll stay in the room,

okay?" He had asked her before stepping away. "The Chief will be here any minute and we don't need to make him even madder." El had simply nodded in agreement

The hospital room was quiet and bleak. A machine in the corner was making a beeping sound, but beyond that was silence. El shuttered as she stepped into the darkness, closing the door behind her. It took a moment before her eyes adjusted and focused on the body lying on the nearby bed.

"Mike!" She said a little too loudly as she rushed towards him. His head was turned to the side and his eyes were closed. A blanket was pulled up to his chest but his arms were lying on top of it. There weren't any visible injuries, but that didn't stop the tears from welling up in her eyes.

"Mike, I'm here," she said more quietly this time as she leaned over the bed. With a shaking hand, she brushed some of his messy, black hair away from his face. He looked so peaceful. She wished he was asleep in his bed and not in this terrible place.

"I-I'm sorry, Mike," El whispered as she continued to play with his hair. She was always amazed at how much comfort this action brought her. "You got hurt because of me. You wanted to see me. It's my fault..."

NO! She thought as she cut off her own words. *Not my fault. Didn't want to be in the cabin. Away from Mike. Away from friends.* Her tears dried up instantly as anger began filling her small body. Her free hand clenched into a fist.

Not my fault, she thought again. *HIS fault.*

Without warning the door suddenly flew open. El didn't even flinch. She knew who it was that had finally arrived. It was the person she now blamed entirely for Mike's fate.

"Go away!" She snapped as the only lightbulb illuminating the room burst into a thousand fragments, plunging the room into further darkness. Mike remained undisturbed as El turned around. Only the light streaming in from the hallway illuminated her furious face.

“What’s wrong, Ellie. Not happy to see me?”

El gasped as she realized her mistake. Her anger was immediately replaced by embarrassment mixed with concern and happiness.

“Nancy!”

Max listened intently as Lucas and Dustin tried to explain the events of the last few hours. Unfortunately, their constant bickering over the details and talking over one another led to some confusion. “You guys...”

“No, that’s not what Will said,” Dustin interrupted once again.

“Hold on...” Max tried once again to get their attention.

“Yes it is! How do you not remember this? It happened, like, three hours ago,” Lucas replied as he tried to control his anger in front of Max.

“I remember what *actually* happened,” Dustin countered. “You’re the one who’s forgetting...”

“STOP!” Max yelled, cutting off Dustin and finally getting the boys attention. She wished that Mike was with them. Although their relationship didn’t begin on the best of terms, she quickly realized that Mike was the de facto leader of the Party, and the Dungeon Master, for many reasons. At least he could tell a story...

“It doesn’t matter *exactly* what Will said,” Max scolded them. “What matters is that someone... uhh... something...”

“Bizarro Dustin!” Dustin chimed in.

“I am never calling him that,” Max replied as she rolled her eyes at Dustin. “What matters is that *it* attacked Will and maybe Mike and

Nancy too.”

“Right,” Lucas said, nodding his head.

“Sooo what are we going to do about it,” Max continued, looking between Lucas and Dustin. She was worried about the others but couldn’t help but feel a twinge of happiness that Lucas and Dustin came to her. They really considered her a full member of the Party.

“Well, Jonathan took Will to the hospital. And that’s where Mike and Nancy are,” Dustin said as he turned to Lucas. “We could go there.”

“But the Chief is probably still there and he thinks we went home,” Lucas replied. Besides possibly feeling the wrath of Chief Hopper, Lucas hated hospitals.

“Since when are you afraid of getting into trouble, Stalker?” Max said with a sly smile.

“I’m... I’m not!” Lucas replied quickly. “Yeah, uhh... let’s go to the hospital. Maybe El’s already there too.”

“Yes!” Dustin said enthusiastically as he jumped up from the couch. “We’ll have the whole Party together and then we can plan the attack!”

“The attack?” Max questioned, staring at Dustin with wide eyes.

“Shit. We didn’t tell you about the lab yet,” Dustin said, his smile disappearing as he met Lucas’s gaze. This was all more complicated than Max realized.

Max turned her attention to Lucas but he didn’t look at her. “We’ll tell you about it on the way,” he mumbled. “C’mon, let’s go.”

The now trio of Party members headed back outside into the cold. The snow made it infeasible for Max to use her skateboard, so she hopped on the back of Lucas’s bike. She wrapped her arms around his torso, bringing some happiness back into Lucas’s world.

“Son of a bitch! I forgot we have to ride all the way there!” Dustin grumbled as he picked up his bike. “Do you think the hospital will

have hot chocolate?”

El leapt forward and embraced Nancy as tears once again filled her eyes. “I’m... I’m sorry. I thought you were...” El shook her head against Nancy’s chest. “Are you okay? I’m so s-sorry...” she stammered.

“Shh... It’s alright,” Nancy interrupted as she rubbed El’s back. “I’m fine. Just a little bump.” *And another scar*, she thought, remembering the one on her palm.

Jonathan stood next to her watching the touching scene. Although it had definitely not started off so nice. He glanced at the broken glass on the floor and quietly disappeared to find a broom. Thankfully, the commotion hadn’t caught the attention of the nurse a few doors down.

El pulled her face away from Nancy and observed the bandage on her forehead. Her usually perfectly combed hair was in tangles and her eyes looked tired and sad.

“Are you keeping my brother safe?” Nancy asked, turning her attention to Mike. When Jonathan entered her room, Nancy immediately asked him to help her get up and go see her younger sibling. Jonathan was not in any position to protest.

“Yes,” El responded quietly. “Safe. With me.”

“Can you help me over to the bed?” Nancy asked sweetly. “I’m still having a little trouble keeping my balance.”

El suddenly realized that she was leaning against the door a bit. She mustered her strength, and maybe used just a bit of her powers, and helped guide Nancy over to the bed.

“Hi Mike,” Nancy whispered as she examined the sleeping boy. “He

looks cute when he's asleep doesn't he?" She said with a grin in El's direction.

El didn't blush. She wasn't embarrassed about her feelings like Mike sometimes was. "Yes. Pretty."

Nancy couldn't help but giggle as Jonathan returned with a broom.

"How is he?" Jonathan asked as he turned on another light and began sweeping the broken glass of the light bulb into a pile.

"He's trying to rest," a gruff voice said from behind them. They all turned to see Chief Hopper's imposing figure standing in the doorway. He didn't look amused. "I thought I made it very clear to everyone in this room about what you could and could not do."

Jonathan opened his mouth but no words came out as the Chief's eyes landed on him. Nancy spoke up instead.

"You weren't going to stop me from seeing my brother," Nancy said sternly. "And you should know better by now that you can't keep these two apart," she added, gesturing at El and Mike.

Hopper took a deep breath before shaking his head. He had already noticed the pile of glass on the floor and deduced what, or more like *who*, had caused it. "Let's go, kid. I'm taking you back to the cabin before anyone else sees you."

"No." El said forcefully, her eyes flickering with anger once again. "Staying with Mike," she added as she backed up against the bed.

Hopper stepped into the room and flicked on the main light switch. The sudden brightness caused the occupants to squint their eyes. "This isn't up for debate," he said, his voice growing louder. "You're coming with me right now. End of discussion."

Before El could reply she felt a hand on her shoulder. "El," Nancy said softly to her, "Thank you for checking on Mike and making sure he's okay. But you know it's too dangerous for you to be in a place like this."

El was mad at Hopper but she couldn't even pretend to be upset with

Nancy. "I-I don't want to leave him. I promised I wouldn't leave again..." El said quietly, no longer paying any attention to the Chief.

"You're not leaving anyone," Nancy replied. "You're staying safe so you can both see each other again, okay?" Nancy then leaned in close to El and whispered in her ear. "Once we're out of here I'll make sure you get to see him right away."

"Promise?" El whispered back.

Nancy smiled. "I promise. Now get going before the grumpy police chief starts yelling at us even more."

El gave her a tiny smile before turning her attention back to Mike. She leaned over the sleeping boy and gave his hair a final brush. "Bye Mike."

Hopper watched as El bent down further and pressed a soft kiss to the top of Mike's forehead. *For crying out loud*, he thought to himself. *It's not like the damn kid is dying.*

"Alright, let's go," Hopper said as El finally turned away from Mike. "And Jonathan, your mother is on her way. Tell her I'll be back in little bit, alright?"

"Yea, okay. I'll uhh... I'll go see how Will's doing after I bring Nancy back to her room," Jonathan replied as he looked at Nancy for approval. She nodded in agreement. Jonathan had briefly explained to her that Will had fallen and hurt his ankle.

"Great idea," Hopper muttered as he watched El walk out the door without even a glance in his direction. "Let's all try a little harder to follow the rules from now on." With that final declaration, Chief Hopper exited Mike's room and guided El towards the elevator. He was not looking forward to the ride home. Neither was she.

"So, what really happened to Will?" Nancy asked as she leaned against Jonathan. Her head was beginning to throb badly once again. She knew she was going to pay a price for getting out of bed but seeing Mike was the only thing that mattered to her.

Jonathan loved the feeling of Nancy pressed against him. It reminded

him of a night they had spent together a while back...

“Uhh, we’re not really sure yet,” he said, unsurprised that she saw through his lie. “But it wasn’t an accident. And we don’t think your car crash was either.”

Nancy breathed in heavily and looked up at Jonathan. “Help me back to my room. And then tell me everything.” She gave Mike a final glance before Jonathan helped guide her into the hallway. He turned the light off and closed the door quietly behind them as an annoyed looking nurse approached them.

“What are you doing out of bed, young lady?” The nurse asked briskly.

Nancy couldn’t help but roll her eyes.

“Seriously guys, I...I can’t do this anymore,” Dustin said, panting. “Next time, I’m calling Steve and making him drive. Where is Steve anyway?”

“He never stops talking, does he?” Max asked as Lucas continued to pedal quickly. The hospital was finally in view.

“You’re just noticing that now!?” Lucas asked incredulously.

A minute later they were skidding into the parking lot which was, thankfully, mostly clear of snow. All of sudden, Lucas braked hard, causing Max’s head to smack into the back of his own.

“Oww, what the Hell!?” Max cried as she rubbed her head. “What’d you do that for?”

Dustin also came to an abrupt stop as he now saw the same thing Lucas did: A pissed off looking El walking in front of an equally annoyed looking Chief Hopper.

“Uh-oh,” Dustin muttered as they watched them heading to Hopper’s car. “They don’t look very happy. Maybe we should... shit.”

Hopper glanced over at the kids before continuing to walk, then stopping and doing a double-take. His mouth was agape as he started at them.

“Still not afraid of getting in trouble?” Max asked Lucas as she hopped off the bike. “Hiya Chief!”

The familiar voice made El, who had continued walking towards the car, stop and spin around on the spot. She was shocked to see three of her friends - well, two of her friends and Max who she will still unsure about - mere feet away. It had been over two weeks since the Snow Ball and she hadn’t seen any of them.

Without any hesitation, El ran towards the trio and practically crashed into Dustin, who had hurriedly jumped off his bike. “Dustin!” She squealed as they embraced each other. He practically lifted her right off the ground.

“Hey El! I missed you!” Dustin exclaimed as he squeezed her tightly.

“I missed you too!” She replied immediately.

“Hey, what about me?” Lucas said, feeling a little miffed. El smiled warmly at him, still in Dustin’s arms.

“Missed you too, Lucas!” El replied. But then she hesitated as her eyes journeyed to the girl standing next to him. “Hi... Max.”

Max was still upset and confused as to why El was so cold to her, but she was happy to at least be acknowledged. “Hey, Eleven,” she said, using the full name just to be safe.

Unfortunately, the happy reunion was quickly broken up by a large and livid man who had stomped over to them.

“What. The. FUCK!?” Hopper screamed at the children. His use of foul language in front of minors was the least of his concerns right now. He was not having a good day.

'Nobody knows where my Johnny has gone

But Judy left the same time'

The music was echoing throughout the entire building. He had been able to tap into the PA system from his base of operations. Luckily, someone had left behind a bunch of records and a turntable. Listening to music helped keep him both focused and relaxed.

'Why was he holding her hand

When he's supposed to be mine'

He had spent the last several weeks preparing everything so it was just right. It had been a lot of hard work and he hoped it was worth it. He'd find out soon enough. Very soon.

'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to

Cry if I want to, cry if I want to

You would cry to if it happened to you'

He whistled along to the melody of the song as he strode down another barely-lit hallway, carrying a heavy box full of wires and cables.

'Play all my records, keep dancing all night

But leave me alone for a while'

Maybe he was a little nervous, but it didn't show. He was actually more angry than anything else. He had scolded himself for some of the stunts he'd pulled recently. They really weren't necessary and they didn't even make him feel any better. They had only caused more pain.

'Till Johnny's dancing with me

I've got no reason to smile'

Three more days. Just three more days until his plans would finally come to fruition. He had been playing this game for far too long. This would hopefully be the last battle he'd ever fight.

'It's my party and I'll cry if I want to

Cry if I want to, cry if I want to

You would cry to if it happened to you'

He wished he had been able to dance with her to songs like this one. *Well, maybe something a little happier*, he mused. But he knew she would have loved any song as long as it meant that they could've held each other close for real.

'Judy and Johnny just walked through the door

Like a queen with her king'

He chuckled after that last line. *How apropos*, he thought to himself.

'Oh what a birthday surprise

Judy's wearing his ring'

He placed another box on the floor and wiped the sweat from his brow. He wasn't surprised that he was tiring so quickly. Barely eating anything combined with an excessive use of his powers over the last few days had drained him significantly.

"It's my party, and I'll cry if I want to" he sang as he walked up to a window. *"Cry if I want to, cry if I want to"* he continued.

Steven gazed out at the snow-covered landscape. The imposing front gate was still open, awaiting the arrival of his guests. *There's just nothing like a good party*, he thought to himself as he smiled widely before breaking into song once again.

"You would cry too if it happened tooooo yoooooooooooooooooooo"

Notes for the Chapter:

Alright, so almost 2 weeks without an update. Sorry about that. Although, this is the longest chapter yet so more to enjoy! The penultimate chapter is next, and boy do I need to cover a lot of material. That chapter may be even longer than this one as I still want the final chapter to be a shorter epilogue. We'll see. I'll try to get it done soon, but it may take at 2-3 weeks.

I hope you all enjoy this latest installment. Looking back, I would have done a few things differently in the earlier chapters, but this is how you learn. Enjoy!

10. Perchance to Dream

Summary for the Chapter:

The blackness came to her quickly and almost too easily. Her constant practice over the last year had clearly paid off. El's eyes shot open as she spun around, desperate to see something in the desolate expanse. Finally, an image came into view and she gasped in surprise.

Open the gate, three cheers for subject Eleven,

*Just so **pretty** and **perfect** , our savior from heaven,*

Her Papa so proud of the powers she was given,

Will she finish the fight like a true heroine?

Dustin, Lucas and Max survived the wrath of Chief Hopper, but just barely. His ranting and raving went on for several minutes until Joyce Byers arrived and calmed him down. None of the friends spoke during the tirade and even Max would later admit that she was a bit scared too.

But Joyce's arrival did more than end the fierce scolding: It provided four members of the Party with a chance to talk and compare notes about the recent goings-on in their not-so-sleepy town.

"You four are going to sit in the fuc..." Hopper cut himself off as he glanced at Joyce. "...sit in the car until I return and you will NOT leave it. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, sir," three tiny voices said in unison. The fourth member of the group remained silent and stoic as she stared at Hopper, almost

daring him to say anything further.

“If anyone leaves. And I mean anyone...” he continued as he glared at each of them individually. “I will personally speak with each of your parents and make sure that this Christmas is one you’ll never forget.”

“Jim,” Joyce said, eager for this spectacle to end. “My sons are waiting.”

Hopper nodded as he pointed at the vehicle and watched the children enter it, one by one. “Alright, let’s go. I swear to God if one of them...”

“Jim!” Joyce interrupted as they continued to walk towards the hospital.

“You... you guys don’t think he could, like, actually cancel Christmas, do you!?” Dustin asked the rest of the group, his eyes wide with fear.

The others turned to look at him and just stared without saying a word.

“Uhh... never mind...” He mumbled as he fidgeted in his seat and looked down at his hands.

The renewed silence lasted only a moment longer until El was peppered with questions about Mike and Nancy. El tried to answer all of them as best she could. She told them about seeing the car accident in the void and finding Mike and Nancy with Hopper

The others didn’t interrupt or make a sound as El described the eventual hospital room reunion with the Wheelers and Jonathan. They could tell how upset this morning’s events had made her.

“And... and then Hopper came and I had to leave. But Nancy said I would see Mike again soon. And then we left but you were here.” El finished with a tiny smile.

“Wow,” Dustin said. “You saved them again, El! You’re amazing!” he exclaimed as he attempted to give her a hug in the cramped backseat. El let out a squeal as he collapsed on her and Lucas.

“Hey, watch it!” Lucas exclaimed, trying to avoid getting crushed between them.

Max was against the left-side window and was glad she avoided the tussle. But a part of her was also sad for missing out on the fun. This was yet another moment shared by them but not her.

Dustin and Lucas continued to wrestle around as El giggled. But then her thoughts turned back to why they were all here.

“Will!” she said loudly, causing the boys to freeze. “Will is here? Why?”

Lucas and Dustin settled down as they both broke into the story about what had happened to Will earlier in the day and their concern that El was in trouble.

When El heard about Will’s encounter with a fake -“*Bizarro!*” - Dustin, she gasped. Lucas ended the story right before he and Dustin had left the Byers’ residence for the Department of Energy facility.

“Something happened last night,” El said quietly. “Like with Will but with me.” Slowly, El began to tell her second story. She told them all about the encounter in the woods with someone pretending to be Mike, causing the boys to flip out once again.

“There’s a Bizarro Mike too!?” Dustin exclaimed before Lucas punched him in the arm. “Ouch! Why’d you do that!?”

“Because It’s obviously the same person... thing... whatever!” Lucas replied as he waved his hands. “It tricked El just like Will. Pretending to be one of us and then trying to hurt Will and to uhh...” He wasn’t really sure what the objective had been with El. “...to scare you I guess?” He said quizzically, while looking at El for confirmation.

El nodded as flashbacks of the event flooded back into her mind. She shuddered as she thought about it. “I was scared, yes.”

“I would have freaked out too,” Max chimed in. She had been silent up to now. “But I’m glad you’re okay.”

El looked over at Max and forced a small smile. She decided that she

needed to speak with Max in private about things since it was clear that she was going to be a part of the group from now on. "Thank you."

"Soo..." Lucas began. "There's something else we need to tell you too, El."

He described the trip he and Dustin took to the lab. How the gate was open. How there was a sign painted in blood. What it said.

"It said umm... '*Welcome home, Jane*'" He stopped as El breathed in heavily at the mention of her real name. "Umm yea, and then '*Tour begins eleven pm 12/17*'..."

"That's 11 o'clock at night on December 17th, El. That's Tuesday and today is Saturday, so three days from now," Dustin quickly added as El had looked a bit confused at first. She nodded after Dustin's explanation.

Lucas and Dustin then fell silent as they both worried about continuing. "So, it said one more thing..." Lucas finally said but trailed off as he picked at the sleeve of his jacket.

Max had been filled in during the ride and sighed before volunteering the final line. "The last part was '*Bring any dates, goodbye Eight*.'"

El whipped her head towards the girl and Max instantly regretted getting involved. "I... we don't know what that means." Max mumbled as she looked away.

El's heart began to race as both fear and anger consumed her. "Leave," she said, to no one in particular but Max assumed it was directed specifically to her.

"Wha...what?" Max asked, the color draining from her face.

"All of you. Leave." El replied forcefully.

The three friends just gaped at her. "Bu...but Hopper said..." Dustin began before being cut off.

"Please," El interrupted quickly, but with more softness in her voice

this time. She took a deep breath before continuing. "Eight is Kali. My sister. I need to see if she's safe. Have to go into the void. Now. Okay?"

The boys remembered when El was able to locate Barb and Will in the void. They both had multiple questions burning in their brains but they refrained from bothering El with them in that moment. Max continued to look both confused and nervous.

"It's alright, Max," Lucas said somberly as he motioned for her to open the car door. "We'll be right outside, okay El?"

"Yes," she replied as flicked her head in the direction of the car radio. Max and the boys exited into the cold and closed the door as a channel of just static began to play. The white noise filled the vehicle.

El grabbed a towel off the floor, ignoring the fact that it was probably dirty, and wrapped it around her head. She slowed her breathing and tried to concentrate on the individual she wanted to locate.

The blackness came to her quickly and almost too easily. Her constant practice over the last year had clearly paid off. El's eyes shot open as she spun around, desperate to see something in the desolate expanse. Finally, an image came into view and she gasped in surprise.

Kali!?

Jim Hopper was indeed correct that Joyce Byers had completely flipped out on the phone upon hearing about her son's latest calamity. However, her fear quickly turned to relief after she learned that the injury was minor and was not the result of anything sinister or supernatural. That's the story her sons had presented anyway.

Will left the hospital late afternoon, his stay lasting only a few hours.

His ankle was, to everyone's relief, not broken or even fractured. More than anything, he was simply shaken up by recent events and left with a nagging headache.

Neither Dustin, Lucas nor Max got a chance to visit Mike or Will in the hospital. After Joyce settled in with her son, Hopper enlisted Jonathan to escort the troublesome kids back to their respective homes. After ensuring that the car with all four occupants securely inside successfully exited the parking lot, Hopper gritted his teeth and made his way back to El.

"You and I need to have a nice, long talk," Hopper said to El as he entered the vehicle. She was sitting quietly in the passenger seat, staring out the window while wringing a towel between her hands.

"Did you hear me, kid? There's a lot going on here that I don't understand but I think you do. Am I right?" He asked with an accusatorial tone.

El turned her head and that's when Hopper saw the tears streaming down her face. She didn't have to say a word.

"Oh, hey it's alright kid." Any anger he was feeling disappeared within an instant. Hopper reached over for El and she threw herself into his grasp. Although still upset with him, El desperately needed the comfort he provided. Her loud sobs were muffled by his heavy jacket

"I'm sorry. Shh, you're okay," Hopper continued as he rubbed her back and sighed. "I'm not... I'm not angry with you, kid. I'm just worried, that's all."

El didn't reply and Hopper didn't say anything further. He continued to hold tight until her cries subsided after a few minutes. Finally, he loosened his grip as he knew they had to leave. "Let's get you home, alright?" he asked soothingly.

El was too exhausted to complain. She nodded against his chest but remained silent. Hopper pressed a kiss against the top of her head before she pulled away from him. El returned her gaze towards the hospital as she wiped face.

Hopper decided to let the radio do all the talking on the trip home. He glanced in El's direction on occasion but she never looked over at him. She continued to stare off into the distance, not really focusing on any one thing in particular.

El had found Kali in the void but her appearance had changed significantly. Her hair was much shorter with bright red streaks. Her makeup wasn't as dark and menacing and even her clothes were lighter and more colorful.

Relief swept over El as she walked towards the scene taking shape in front of her. Kali was not imprisoned or being hurt by bad men. She was sitting in a room with several others that El recognized from her trip to Chicago.

"...and it's way too hot here," she heard Axel finish as he threw a knife against the wall in front of him. It hit with a resounding thud.

"I'll take this over another winter in the city any day," Dottie replied. She was sitting in a dirty chair with her feet up on a milk crate.

Mick wasn't really paying any attention to them. She was too busy staring out a nearby window and scanning the area for signs of trouble. They were far away from Chicago, but that didn't mean that she was going to let her guard down.

"Well at least there were targets in the city. What are we doing here besides hiding like rats in the sewer?" Axel asked as another knife cut into the wooden wall.

"Do you want to go back?" Kali snapped, turning her head toward the pair. "With every cop still looking for us? We were lucky to make it out of there alive."

"No thanks to that stupid *sister* of yours..." Axel grumbled, thinking about the shootout and all the damage caused to their van.

Kali glared at him and considered conjuring up some spiders, but decided it wasn't worth the energy. "Jane isn't here anymore. You don't need to talk about her," she replied coolly.

El's eyes widened at the mention of her name. She remembered how

badly things had gone in Chicago. The encounter with the bad man who had worked in the lab. The fight with the police. Her decision to leave the group. To leave her sister.

“Would be nice to find people so easily though. Right?” Dottie chimed in. “Wouldn’t have to waste time sitting around waiting...”

“ENOUGH!” Kali yelled, causing everyone, including El, to jump. “We were doing just fine without Jane and we don’t need her now.”

El looked at the angry expression on Kali’s face. It scared her but also made her feel sad at the same time.

Kali missed El dearly but was angry at the way she had left them. That, combined with her recent meet up with Steven had filled her with a volatile mix of emotions. “She’s just a... just a foolish child who doesn’t understand anything!” She continued, the anger spilling out of her in this instance.

Kali’s words hit El like a punch to the stomach. Tears welled up in her eyes as she realized that Kali didn’t miss or care about her at all.

“I’m glad she’s gone!” Kali finished as she got up and stomped away from the others. She didn’t want them to see her cry.

El’s breathing was unsteady as the tears began spilling out. She didn’t wait to listen to anything more the others said as they, along with the entire scene, faded from view. El ripped the towel away from her eyes as very real tears began streaming down her face.

She hates me, El thought.

Mike and Nancy were discharged from the hospital the following day. The doctor informed Mr. and Mrs. Wheeler that their children were going to be just fine, minus a few bumps and bruises. And that cut on Nancy’s forehead.

The sibling's Sunday was filled with a multitude of questions and bedrest. Their father continued to grumble about the car even though it was barely damaged, much to everyone's annoyance. Mrs. Wheeler, in contrast, played the perfect, doting mother, attending to all of her children's needs.

Jonathan split the day keeping Will company and checking in on Nancy. Steve Harrington was still out of town and Nancy greatly appreciated the Jonathan's company as it allowed for a break from her mother's constant badgering.

After initially demanding that Mike only rest and not speak with his friends, Mrs. Wheeler finally relented after a few contentious hours.

"I need to see them!" Mike had exclaimed, annoyed that Nancy was able to see Jonathan but his friends weren't allowed over. "Why does Jonathan get to come over and they can't?" This was his third attempt and he hoped that it would be his last.

"Because he's just one person and he's not staying long, Michael. I can't have all of your friends showing up today. You know how you guys are when you're all together," Mrs. Wheeler stated as she moved about the kitchen. Holly was occupying herself at the dining room table with some crayons and construction paper.

"Okay, so they could come over one at time then, right?" Mike asked, seizing on this possible loophole. The resumption of a mild headache also made him question as to whether or not seeing all his friends at once really would be a good idea this soon.

"Michael! That's enough," his mom replied with a twinge of annoyance in her voice. She was trying to concentrate on making lunch for everyone.

Mike was pissed but he could tell that seeing his friends in person was a losing battle. "Fine! But at least give me back my Supecom so I can talk to them!" Mike pleaded. "They'll want to know that I'm okay. Nancy too!"

Mrs. Wheeler had confiscated the device knowing that her son would talk on it all day and forget to rest. At first, Mike did remain quietly

in his bed, but it didn't take long for him to start pestering her. She supposed that getting a few hours of rest was better than getting none at all.

"Alright, you can call them on that... thing." His mom said as she let out a sigh. She grabbed the Supercom, which was sitting on the counter, and handed it over to her son. "Just don't talk for too long, okay? Your body needs time to heal."

"I know, I know. I won't, I promise," Mike said quickly as he held the Supercom in both hands like it was the most important thing in the world. "Thanks, Mom!" He said as he raced out of the kitchen and bounded up the stairs to his room.

"Slow down!" Mike heard his mom yell before shutting the bedroom door and leaping onto his bed.

"Hey! It's Mike. I'm home. Over!" Mike anxiously awaited a reply. There was so much he and the rest of the Party needed to discuss. He tapped his fingers on the Supercom anxiously as the seconds ticked by.

"Well it's about freakin' time," was Dustin's static-filled reply.

"Shut up, Dustin. Hey man, It's Lucas. I'm here too. Welcome home. Over," Lucas chimed in a moment later.

"Thanks!" Mike replied quickly. "Nancy told me that El's okay and with safe with the Chief." To say that Mike had only been relieved would be a gross understatement. The second he saw Nancy that morning he didn't even ask if she was alright before demanding to know about El. His sister was just a bit annoyed at first but couldn't help but smile at her love-sick brother.

"So how's Will?" Mike continued. "I heard he left the hospital yesterday. So he just like fell or something in the woods? Over."

Mike didn't find out that Will had also been in the hospital until his mom mentioned it on the car ride home. Unfortunately, he had only heard the cover story from her. Nancy gave him a quick glance from the front seat but hadn't been able to fill Mike in on the real story

yet. Their mom had shooed them both into their respective rooms and kept checking on them far too often.

“Hold on, you don’t know what really happened to Will!?” Dustin replied first.

“Wha...what do you mean what really happened? Over!” Mike sputtered out, his blood pressure rising and his head pounding just a bit harder than before.

“Shit. Whose turn is it, Lucas? Yours or mine? Over.” Dustin said as he realized they were going to have to tell the story once again.

There was an awkward moment of silence before Lucas replied. “Alright, fine. I’ll start. Okay so after you took off yesterday morning...”

Lucas tried to go through the events of the previous morning slowly. He stopped now and then, always remembering to say “Over,” to let Dustin chirp and to let Mike ask his pointed questions. Bit by bit the blanks of the weekend were filled in.

Mike could feel the sweat collecting on his forehead as he heard about Will’s deception. “Bizarro Dustin!” Dustin exclaimed once again, unable to resist the designation much to the dismay of Lucas.

After scolding Dustin, Lucas discussed the journey to the lab with Dustin and the sign written in blood. Mike decided to stay relatively silent during that part. It was a lot of new information to process and he had to get his thoughts sorted out before reacting.

The meet-up with Max was next. “You should have seen him, Mike. He was practically drooling all over her,” Dustin chimed in.

“Shut up!” was the immediate reply from the blushing storyteller.

Lucas then spoke about the trip to the hospital. And finally, he relayed what had happened to El in the woods the previous night. Mike didn’t take that part very well.

“What the fuck!?” He practically screamed into the Supercom as his body shook in anger. Not only was one of his best friends attacked by

some strange person or creature but El was targeted too. And if that wasn't bad enough, it was a fake version of Mike that had so cruelly tricked her. His fury was also accompanied by a terrible pain in his heart.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Lucas said as he finished the story. "That's what El told us anyway. Maybe once you see her you should ask her more about it. Over."

Mike tried to process this tidal wave of information that had swept over him the last half hour or so. He knew this wasn't enough. This back and forth chatter over Supercoms was not what they needed. The Party had been fractured and he needed to repair it by bringing everyone together again.

"Tonight. I'm sneaking out tonight. And so are you guys. I'm calling an emergency Party meeting. Will too. And...and Max. We need everyone. Over."

"Tonight?" Dustin replied in shock. "Our parents will freak..." he trailed off as he thought about Christmas just over a week away and Hopper's veiled threat the previous day.

"You guys said the sign at the lab said *December 17th*, right? That's in two days! There's no time. We have to meet tonight!" Mike said with determination. "Are you in or are you out? Over."

"Yeah, I'm in," Lucas said without hesitation. There was no point in arguing. He knew it was non-negotiable.

"Son of a bitch! Fine... I am too," Dustin said with resignation. "I bet you're excited to hang out with Max again, huh Lucas? Over." He said, finishing with that growly purr that Lucas hated so much.

"If that thing doesn't kill you, I will Dustin!" Lucas fired back. "I'll let Max know. Where are we going to meet? And what about, Will? He can't walk or ride a bike. Over."

Shit, Mike thought. They had to include Will. No way they were leaving him out. "Then we're going to Will's house. 10pm. Meet at Dustin's and then ride to Will's okay? Over."

“Alright,” Lucas began. “But how are we going to tell Will? His Supercom must be turned off.”

Mike was about to reply as he heard heavy footsteps on the stairs and his mother’s voice calling out. “Michael! You better not still be talking to your friends!”

“Shit, I gotta go,” Mike said hurriedly. I’ll figure out Will. See you guys tonight. Over and out!”

Mike quickly tossed the Supercom onto a pile of clothes on his floor. Jonathan was going to be back in a few hours and he needed to ask him for a favor.

It was unnervingly dark outside. Not only was the Winter Solstice just a few days away, but so was a New Moon. Nimbostratus clouds obscured the shining stars and the streetlights provided only brief respites from the sea of darkness. Luckily, the lights on the front of their bicycles were enough to guide the friends forward.

Dustin didn’t complain as he pumped the pedals on yet another long bike ride. It wasn’t because he was happy. He was just too cold to say anything.

Max was shivering against Lucas, who was actually feeling quite warm at that moment. Lucas ignored the annoyed looks Dustin shot him now and then as the rode next to each other. He was too busy concentrating on the road and keeping up with the bike in front of them.

They let Mike take the lead. There wasn’t any discussion about it. It just happened. Mike had taken off first, clearly in a hurry to get to Will’s house. Dustin and Lucas were more than willing to let him blaze the trail. Besides, they could tell he wanted to be alone with his thoughts a little longer.

Mike was breathing heavily as his bike carved a path through the new-fallen snow on the bumpy road. His head was throbbing again and his body ached but his thoughts were only of Will and El. And the newest monster they had faced. The one he was going to face.

The interior of the Byers' home was mostly dark. Just a single lamp in the living room was still lit. As Mike skidded to a halt, he hoped that they would find a light still on in Will's room as well. He had asked Jonathan to promise he'd tell Will to contact him on his Supercom.

Similarly to Mike, Will had also been forced to rest under the watchful eye of his mother. Due to that, he had missed the earlier conversation with his friends. Once Jonathan returned to his home, he passed on Mike's message. A secret and hasty exchange over Supercoms took place before the boys returned to their forced repose.

"C'mon," Mike whispered to the others as he propped his bike up against the side of house. Lucas and Dustin followed suit and Max trailed behind. The foursome quietly made their way to the back of the property, even trying to control their heavy breathing for fear of being heard.

"Will's light it is on!" Dustin said, a little too loudly for Mike's liking.

"SHH!" Mike hissed as he scurried over to the window. There was indeed a light on in Will's room, right next to his bed. Will was sitting up in bed, drawing something on a pad of paper. It all looked so normal to Mike. He wished that everything could be normal again.

Will was trying to draw the scene from the woods when *Bizarro Dustin* was berating him. Drawing had always helped calm him, especially after the various traumatic events of his short life. He gasped and dropped his crayon as he heard a tapping against his window.

Will had lost track of the time. He gazed at the clock on the wall. *10:04pm*. His friends had arrived. Hopefully with a plan. Will slowly slunk out of bed and made his way to the window. He opened it and

shivered as the cold, night air struck him.

He likes it cold, a voice said in the back of Will's mind. He tried to push that memory away as he observed his friends.

"Hey guys," he whispered to the four smiling faces looking back at him.

"Will!" Mike said before anyone else could reply. "I'm really glad you're okay. We're all..."

"Hey, can we save it for when we're inside? I'm freezing my freakin' butt off!" Max interrupted. She was practically shaking.

The boys couldn't help but chuckle as they began to climb into Will's room as quickly and quietly as possible. Finally, for the first time in what felt like forever, the Party was all gathered together.

All of them, except for El.

A boy and a girl were yelling about at each other but she didn't know why. Or what they were arguing about. Or who they were.

"NO!" He screamed, as he turned and walked away from the girl. His hands were clenched into fists and his breathing was heavy and fast.

"Why are we letting her leave? Why does she get to live and you don't?" He asked as he continued to pace around. He looked furious but also on the verge of tears. "It's not fair, Susie! It's not fair!"

"Steven!" The girl, *Susie*, replied, sounding exasperated. "We don't have time for this again! They'll be back any minute and..." she trailed off for a moment as tears began to fill her eyes "...and this is probably the last time we'll be able to see each other."

The boy, *Steven*, froze instantly. "Don't... don't say that." His voice

was much quieter now as he turned back towards Susie. "I... I can escape and..."

Escape?

"Steven," Susie said, trying to cut him off but only half-heartedly. She was wearing a beautiful dress that shimmered against the blackness. Something incredibly sparkly was sitting in her hair.

Pretty.

"...then I'll come break you out. I know where the facility is and... and after that we'll..." Steven continued. Even in his distressed state, he looked very striking in a crisp blue suit.

"Steven!" Susie said again, a bit more forcefully this time. She removed one of the long, white gloves from her arm and wiped away the tears from her face as she began walking towards him.

What has happening was very confusing, but here was a cute boy who continued to ramble on and on and ignore the girl who was trying to get his attention. It seemed oddly familiar to the onlooker.

"... finish the job together! They won't be able to stop both of us and we don't need the others. They'll just get in our..."

Susie suddenly grabbed Steven from behind and spun him around before he could utter another word. With practiced precision, she leaned up and kissed him deeply. His wide eyes closed as the initial shock wore off. He sighed into her kiss and cupped her face with his hands.

Oh...

After a moment, Susie slowly pulled back from him as she opened her eyes and just stared at him. She wondered how his lips tasted in the real world.

"...way," Steven finished as the breath he had held in finally exited his body. He slowly opened his eyes and returned her gaze. "I... I don't..."

“Shh,” she whispered, holding a finger against his lips. “Don’t be angry. Don’t be sad. This is how it has to be.” Her finger began sliding down his lips, past his chin and down his neck. He trembled beneath her gentle touch.

“You can’t save me,” Susie continued. “But you can save...” she paused before shifting her gaze to her immediate left. “...her.”

Eleven gasped as their eyes met. The pretty, young girl was looking straight at Eleven as if she was standing right there with them.

Can she see me?

Steven didn’t realize that Susie was no longer looking up at him as he had closed his eyes once again in a futile effort to stop tears from forming. “You... you deserve so much better.”

Susie continued to stare at a fixed point in the distance. “We all do. We all *did*. But our suffering shouldn’t be for nothing.” She said as the arm hanging at her side slowly turned. “We cannot let what happened to us be forgotten.”

Her arm continued to turn until the back of it was facing outward. “Or let the people who did these things to us get away with it.”

Eleven’s heart stopped beating as she stumbled backward, barely suppressing a scream with her hand. Even from this distance she recognized the dark mark against the pale white skin of the girl. A simple tattoo just above the wrist. Three digits. 004

Another sister!?

Eleven’s breathing was unsteady and her body was shaking but she forced herself to look back up at the girl’s face. Susie’s stare was unwavering.

“I... I can save you too,” Steven stuttered. He knew it was a lie. Just like this place. A giant lie that he had clung to for years.

“You can’t save everyone. Sometimes sacrifices must be made. Those decisions are hard and painful, but they must be made to prevent further pain and death.” Susie replied to the darkness without

hesitation. "Do you understand?"

She's not asking him...

Steven sighed heavily as he tried to pull Susie in closer to his body. "Yes, I guess I..."

"Do you understand?" Susie asked again, but louder this time. Her eyes remained steady and unblinking.

She's asking me.

Tears began falling from Eleven's eyes as her mouth moved but no words came out. Desperate to express her understanding, she began nodding her head up and down quickly. She hoped that would be enough.

"Yes, I understand," Steven replied as he finally opened his eyes. He pulled back from Susie for a moment so he could grab ahold of her hands. Their fingers intertwined. She felt cold to his touch.

Susie's long stare into the void ended as she turned to meet Steven's bright, blue eyes. She could barely stand to look at them they were so beautiful. She swayed with him a bit and as they turned Eleven got a better look at the boy's face.

Those eyes...

Susie gave Steven another quick peck on the lips before flashing a tiny smile. "Recite something for me," she asked. A feeling of impending dread was spreading throughout her body.

"Of course," Steven replied softly. But before he could begin, Susie pulled away from him and began walking off into the darkness. He was saddened by the loss of her touch.

"Go on," she said in a voice filled with sadness. "I'm listening."

The guards were coming.

Eleven could only watch in awe as the girl slowly walked towards her. Susie was about her height with the same curly brown hair. Her

eyes were a similar shade light shade of brown and her features were soft and pleasing to the eye.

Susie continued to walk forward until she was only a foot or two away from Eleven, who didn't know what to do in response. Cautiously, Eleven took a step forward. And then she heard Steven's words.

"They see you, they see me,

I see you, you see me too,

I saw them, they saw me,

You'll all see, me and you."

Susie smiled and hummed. "Perfect." She raised her hands to her head and removed the diamond-studded tiara from her curls. She held it in her hands, turning the dazzling piece of jewelry over and studying it close. "It's all so perfect." she whispered.

The guards were close.

Susie raised her head and smiled into the void. Eleven smiled back as she hesitantly raised her arm. She knew what to expect when touching anything in this place, but maybe this time would be different.

"Only because of you," Steven replied. "I love you, Susie."

The guards were there.

Eleven's fingers were shaking as she reached out to touch the girl's hand. She sucked in a breath as the distance dwindled down to mere inches.

"I love..." Susie's smile disappeared in an instant and the tiara fell from her hands. A crackling hiss shattered the silence of the void as

the girl was thrown backwards onto the cold, wet floor.

“NOOOOO!” Steven and Eleven both yelled at the same time as they rushed towards the convulsing body. The scene was blurring as Eleven tried to maintain control of the void. But she felt nothing. Absolutely nothing.

What?

Steven reached the girl first and threw his arms around her. “NOT YET!! PLEASE NO!!!” He screamed as the carefully constructed visage around them began to crumble away.

Eleven wasn’t able to contain her screams this time. The attractive and impeccably dressed teenagers who stood before her just moments ago were gone. In their place was a smaller, paler and thinner pair with shaved heads and bodies covered in scars and bruises. She recognized the dirty hospital gowns they were wearing. She used to wear a similar piece of clothing.

A burn mark was forming on the front of Susie’s gown as another shock caused the void to shudder. Eleven suddenly realized she wasn’t in control here. It was the girl. Susie. This was her world. Her void.

They’re trying to force her back!

“THE LAB,” Susie shrieked, the pain coursing through her body. “IN HAWKINS. FINISH THE FIGHT!”

Steven was babbling incoherently and shaking as he tried to keep ahold of her between his thin, weak arms. He could feel her slipping away.

Eleven summoned all of her courage and approached the couple. “T-tell me how.”

Silence and stillness suddenly filled the emptiness. Everything appeared frozen in space and time, except for the girl lying on the ground. Her body had stopped flailing and she turned her head towards the sound of a voice that didn’t exist and belonging to a girl who wasn’t there.

“When the time comes, he’ll find you. Promise me you’ll go. Promise me you’ll do whatever it takes to end our suffering,” Susie said as she began to fade from view.

Eleven ignored the intense mix of feelings she was experiencing and tried to maintain focus on the vanishing girl. “I promise,” she stated with determination.

Susie turned her attention back to the boy she had never truly met but had fallen in love with one last time. “Goodbye, Steven. My everything,” she whispered. “Good luck... Jane.”

Eleven gasped as she heard her real name. The desolate world suddenly unfroze before dissipating completely. The last thing she saw was that pair of blazingly blue eyes staring off into space.

It was him!

“So that’s the plan?” Lucas asked Mike with skepticism in his voice. Dustin and Will exchanged a knowing look as Max continued to stare at her hands.

“Yeah? What’s wrong with it?” Mike replied. He was actually more confused than annoyed at Lucas’s question. He thought the plan made perfect sense. *Well okay, maybe not perfect*, he conceded to himself.

“Uhh, maybe the part about where we go to the lab on our own and not tell anyone?” Lucas said as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “Don’t you think we should at least tell Jonathan and your sister?”

Mike bit his lip as he thought about the prospect of continuing to leave his sister in the dark about what was happening. He knew she would be furious but she had already gotten hurt enough.

Mike had also already ruled out involving the Chief, which didn’t

really surprise anyone. “He already hid El away from us for an entire year!” Mike had exclaimed in the quietest way possible. “What do you think he’ll do with her if he finds out about whatever is at the lab?” He asked them pointedly.

The decision not to inform the chief of police, the man who was also El’s *de facto* father at this point, of their plan didn’t make the friends feel so good. However, they were all in agreement that Hopper would probably never let El out again if they told him. Maybe he’d even take her away from Hawkins forever. The mere thought of that potential outcome filled Mike with immeasurable dread.

“We already lost Will. That only leaves... four of us, Mike! Four of us!” Dustin added as he surveyed the room as if he had forgotten who was present.

“I’m not lost...” Will mumbled more to himself than to anyone else. It didn’t seem like anyone heard him as Mike quickly replied to Dustin.

“Nancy is still hurt from the crash,” Mike replied. He figured that would be as good excuse as any for the time being. “And Jonathan...” He hesitated as he looked over at Will who was propped up against the back of his bed with the covers pulled up to his chest. “Jonathan needs to keep Will safe. And Nancy too.”

“Steve can’t even help us this time,” Lucas said. Mike had learned of Steve’s absence from overhearing Jonathan and Nancy talk. He had informed the others that, unfortunately, his assistance wouldn’t be possible. “No guns. No bats. We can’t keep fighting with just my wrist rocket...” Lucas continued with a sigh.

“Maybe if we brought along a certain friend who happens to have superpowers...” Dustin began before being violently cut off by Mike.

“NO!” Mike half-shouted before being loudly shushed by everyone else in the room. “Sorry, sorry,” he said more quietly as he looked down at the floor. “I...I told you guys. It’s too dangerous for El. What if...” He continued to stare at his shoes as he felt his eyes getting misty once again.

“What if it’s just a trap and something bad happens to her? Like,

really bad,” Mike continued. He blinked rapidly as he tried to fight back the tears burning his eyes. “I...I can’t lose her again. I can’t.”

“But do you think she wants to lose you? What if something happens to you in there?” Max asked, seeing the look of despair on Mike’s face. She was continuously impressed by how much he truly loved El.

Mike didn’t have an immediate answer for Max’s question. He just shrugged his shoulders and wiped at his eyes with his sleeve. There was no use in trying to hide his emotions. “No, but... but at least she’ll be safe. She deserves to be safe for once. And happy.”

The friends sat in silence for a few minutes after that. The occasional snuffle from Mike was the only sound in the room besides the ticking clock. It was 11:14 pm. If Mike got his way, they’d be at the lab in less than 48 hours.

“Alright, fine,” Lucas said suddenly as every head turned towards him at once. “Just the four of us. But we need someone to stay behind in case we need to call for backup.”

“I...I can’t go so I can do that,” Will chimed in. His ankle was still very swollen from the fall. Lucas nodded in his direction.

“If the Supercom gets out of range, my mom still has one of Hopper’s police walkies. I’m... I’m sorry I can’t help fight... again,” Will said, feeling sad that his friends were once again going to fight on his behalf.

“Don’t worry, Will. We’ll make Bizarro Dustin pay for what he did to you and El,” Dustin said as he gave Will a big high five. It was followed by yet another round of shushes.

“Yeah, let’s go kick this douchebag’s ass!” Max added in, shooting Mike a wide smile.

Mike’s mood improved immediately. He was very grateful for the support of his friends. “Will, if we radio in you gotta tell everyone, okay? Jonathan, Nancy and...” He hesitated but knew he had to include him. “... and the Chief. Especially the Chief.”

“You got it,” Will replied, trying to feign happiness. He glanced down at the half-finished drawing by his side. The image made him shiver. He wondered what his friends were going to encounter in the supposedly shuttered and empty lab.

The sound of footsteps somewhere in the house broke their focus. “That’s probably my mom!” Will hissed. “You guys gotta go!”

With lightning speed, and surprising quietness, Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max all scrambled to their feet and escaped through Will’s bedroom window. Mike went last and carefully closed the window behind him.

With a final smile and thumbs up, Mike disappeared from view with the rest of his friends into the black of night. Will shuffled in bed and tried to bury his head into the pillow as his door creaked open.

Joyce Byers peered into the lit room with initial concern, but that feeling quickly passed as she observed that nothing was amiss. She walked over to the side of the bed and stared down at her sleeping son.

He must have fallen asleep while drawing again, Joyce mused to herself as she noticed some scattered crayons and papers on the nightstand and bed. She reached down and collected the remaining ones from the bed and began to flip through them.

One was of the hospital room Will had briefly stayed in the previous day. There was another showing a scene of snow-covered woods. And then Joyce gasped as she beheld the final drawing. A menacing face with bright blue eyes stared back at her from the page.

She suddenly felt cold as her mind recalled the images of the shadowy monster and the maze of tunnels Will had created the previous year. A part of Joyce wanted to wake Will up and ask him about the drawing, but she stopped herself.

Probably just another character from that game of theirs, Joyce convinced herself as she set the papers down on the nightstand. She bent over and gave Will a soft kiss on the top of his head before turning off the lamp and exiting the room.

Will's heart was still racing as he heard the door close shut. It was a while before he was finally able to fall asleep that night. But it was a restless sleep. And it was filled with terrible dreams.

Notes for the Chapter:

I told you it was going to be a while before the next chapter got posted... Sorry about that! Hey, it's my longest chapter yet so at least that's something, right? So this will actually be 12 chapters now. The next one will cover basically everything but I want a final shortish chapter to just wrap up the whole tale. I hope nobody minds!

I put a lot of effort into this chapter and re-wrote a lot of it time and time again. I definitely would have done a few things differently in the earlier chapters, but I'm trying hard to get everything addressed. The next chapter will obviously be the most action packed. I'm playing around with a few specific scenes and endings in my head but I'm pretty sure I've decided on the eventual outcomes. Just a warning, it may be several weeks once again before it gets posted. May and early June are very busy for me.

Thank you all for continuing to read this work. It means a lot to me. I'm trying hard not to disappoint anyone!

11. Blood is Thicker

Summary for the Chapter:

The snow was heavy and deep which hindered her progress. She was freezing even though she had taken extra care to bundle up. It seemed as though hours had passed during the silent journey over the snow-covered landscape. The woods were eerily quiet, which brought back horrible memories of the time spent alone.

A body of work on the body of mine,

Somebody's body my body designed,

A body at rest and a body at play,

Somebody's body embodied today.

Each passing night seemed darker than the preceding. Only a sliver of the moon remained in the heavens, but even that slice of light was obscured by a seemingly endless expanse of clouds. It had snowed once again, covering the landscape in a fresh layer of white. The world resembled a blank canvas, just waiting to be colored in.

Although pleasing to the eye, this far-reaching snow storm had several consequences. The first was that many flights into Indiana International Airport were delayed throughout the day. The second was that the heavy snow had made it difficult to travel on foot. These concurrent issues wouldn't normally be a concern for most people, but they were tonight.

Steven peered out from the fourth-floor window of the, up until recently, abandoned building. He despised waiting. And he really,

really loathed the place he was in. It had been a government building. It had been a research facility. It had been a *laboratory*.

It was the ‘Hawkins National Laboratory’, to be specific. Built to pursue various scientific endeavors after World War II, the formidable and secretive structure had been his home for years.

No, not a home. A prison. It had been his prison.

Imprisoned within these walls were countless test subjects over the years. Always different experiments with different purposes overseen by different scientists. Always similar results.

Pain. Despair. Death.

Steven, known to the government as “Subject Seven”, had been part of one of the newer initiatives: The development of psychic and superhuman warriors. It had been dubbed *Project Vertumnus*.

In Roman mythology, Vertumnus was the god of the season, of gardens, fruit trees, plant growth and, most significantly, of *change*. Vertumnus could alter his form at will. He utilized this awesome power of disguise to deceive, manipulate and seduce the mortal humans.

Of course, any other abilities the scientists were able to discover and augment were explored and exploited to their full potential. Telepathy, telekinesis, the ability to manipulate or control elements and even clairvoyance.

The cost to develop these talents was high. It was too high to involve the courts. Too high to inform Congress. Too high for even the President to know. That is why these projects were kept so secret, tucked away in facilities scattered among remote and quiet towns.

The denizens were blissfully unaware of the horrors within the thick concrete and steel walls. The Government kept them safe. Safe from their enemies. All of their enemies. Both the real and the imagined ones.

Steven’s gaze was steadfast. The silence of the room was only interrupted by the *tick-tock, tick-tock* of a nearby clock. He had

glanced at it several minutes ago but it no longer interested him. His focus remained fixated on the open gate along the perimeter of the compound.

He had spent so much time preparing for this night. He knew they were aware of his presence. He knew they had seen his message. He knew that she knew.

Now all she had to do was show up. But she wasn't here. Neither were they. It was only him.

Alone.

The clock continued to announce the passage of time. If Steven had turned his head he would have seen that it was now 11:07pm. The coincidence would not have been lost on him.

Steven breathed a hot breath onto the pane of glass in front of him. It fogged up instantly. With one of his thin fingers, he began drawing lines in the condensation. Another breath. More lines. Another breath. And then he stopped, satisfied with his drawing.

But the haze on the glass soon began to fade away. The letters and symbol he had drawn became less and less visible. And then the glass was clear again. And then he saw it.

There was a lone figure was standing just outside the gate. The person was standing still, seemingly hesitant about proceeding forward. Steven smiled brightly as he reached over to the table next to him and grabbed a device with several wires attached to it.

With the press of a button, the exterior of the compound was ablaze. Another button and the entire building exploded with light. The difference was startling. The darkness which had been so pervasive was banished in an instant by this pulsating glow.

Steven watched as his first guest suddenly began walking towards the front entrance with determination. If the person had felt any fear or trepidation earlier, there was no longer any evidence of it. As the individual continued to approach, Steven found it impossible to contain his excitement.

“Welcome to your party, Jane!”

Mike sprung awoke, practically gasping for air as he flung the covers of his bed off his body. He was drenched in sweat and breathing hard.

Just a dream, he told himself as he tried to calm his racing heart. *It was just a bad dream.*

Mike’s headache persisted in addition to the soreness which was still pervasive throughout his body. A groan escaped his mouth as he slowly shuffled his body over to the side of the bed and swung his legs over the side. Mike remained sitting there in silence for a few minutes as he tried to remember his dreams.

The lab. Dustin lying lifeless on the floor, a pool of blood spreading outward from his bullet-ridden body. Lucas and Max screaming.

Running. Running towards the sound of her. The sound of her screams. They had caught her. They were taking her away.

Mike shook terrible thoughts from his brain. They weren’t going to stop him from tonight’s mission. Nothing was going to stop him. He took another deep breath as he stared straight ahead.

The previous day had been spent planning and preparing. Hurried conversations over Supercoms took place throughout the day. Mike had to be constantly on the lookout for his Mother. And Nancy. Every time he saw his sister, his stomach tightened. A part of him wanted to tell her, but he never did.

Backpacks were filled with supplies and whatever could pass as a weapon. Lucas had his wrist rocket. Dustin had found a long, metal flashlight. Max promised to steal a switchblade from her brother. Mike had snuck into the garage and grabbed a wrench.

“A wrench?” Lucas had asked in an exasperated tone. “Your weapon is a wrench?”

“What else can I use!?” Mike fired back. He knew his weapon options were already next to none, but the constant presence of his mom and others made it impossible to search the house for anything better.

“And hey, Dustin only has a flashlight! Over.” Mike continued as his face reddened.

“A *metal* flashlight,” Dustin responded quickly. “And my weapon will also provide us with light! Over.”

“This is a freakin’ disaster...” Lucas said, groaning into his Supercom.

“It’s not a disaster! It... it’ll be fine,” Mike replied unconvincingly. “We’ll just make sure we stick together as a team. It’s four of us versus one of him. Over.”

“Yea, if there is just *one* of him...” Dustin mumbled to himself as the back and forth between Mike and Lucas carried on.

Before going to bed that night, Mike had snuck down to the basement to sit in the blanket fort he had constructed for El over a year ago. He turned on the Supercom and began speaking into it just like he did during her three-hundred and fifty-three day absence from his life.

“El? It’s Mike,” he began. “I-I just want you to know that I’m okay and I can’t wait to see you again. It’ll be real soon. I promise!” He sat in silence for a moment before continuing.

“It’s Christmas next week. Do you know what that is? I hope the Chief told you about it. There’s like a whole umm... religious part to it but like it’s this great day when everyone is together and happy and you get presents from people. Like family and friends give each other things and then you get to unwrap them under a Christmas tree that you have in your house and it’s covered with lights and stuff and it’s really pretty and uhh...”

Pretty.

The word echoed in his mind as he stammered. "...and yea, it's uhh... it's really fun and maybe, I don't know, maybe I could visit you. Or you could visit me!" Mike babbled on, barely taking a breath.

"My mom always makes a ton of food and uhh... these great gingerbread cookies that you'd maybe love even more than Eggos!"

Mike stopped talking again as he listened to the static emanating from the Supercom. "I miss you, El. I really, really miss you. I..." He hesitated but only for a second. "I uhh... have to take care of something tomorrow but after that I'm going to see you again and then everything will be good and you won't have to hide from anyone anymore. Ever."

This was followed by another period of silence. Mike couldn't decide if he hoped El was listening tonight or not. He sometimes thought he could almost feel her presence. Mike didn't think he felt anything tonight but that didn't stop him from putting down the Supercom and staring straight ahead.

"Everything is going to be okay, El. I promise."

Present-day Mike was sitting in that same spot on the bed, his gaze still outward and staring at someone who wasn't there. Someone who he wished would always be there in the future.

"Everything is going to be okay, El. I promise."

The weathermen had named this winter storm 'David.' It was a pretty boring name for a very troublesome and impactful weather event. Much of Indiana and the surrounding states were being blanketed by several inches to multiple feet of heavy snow.

By midday December 17th, almost every airplane had been diverted from Indiana International Airport. Almost every airplane.

Colonel Maddox exited the aircraft quickly after a very bumpy and unsettling landing. His team, along with an extremely frustrated Dr. Pfeiffer, followed him out in the cold. The wind was whipping up the snow and it stung the exposed flesh of their faces.

The group trudged toward a hangar wherein several vehicles were parked. The Colonel tried his best to ignore the grumblings of the old doctor as they made their way out of the cold.

“Those imbeciles! Can you believe they kept us flying around in circles?” Dr. Pfeiffer yelled at no one in particular. “They’ll hear about this, you can count on that!”

As they finally entered the structure, Maddox turned back toward the men behind him. “Harris! O’Conner! Warm up the trucks. The rest of you, check your gear. We’re Oscar Mike in ten.” His eyes settled on Dr. Pfeiffer, who was rummaging through his briefcase as he continued to mumble to himself.

“The delay will not compromise the mission, doctor. No need to panic.”

“Panic!? I’m not panicking, Maddox.” Dr. Pfeiffer replied in a huff. “What I *am* is concerned about your future. If this mission fails, who knows where you’ll end up.” He continued to riffle through various folders and dossiers, clearly looking for something in a hurry.

The Colonel continued to observe the older man’s frantic movements. “I’ll see you in the truck,” he finally replied through gritted teeth as he turned on his heels and walked away briskly. With a flick of his wrist, he checked the time: 21:14.

It’ll be close, he thought. Too close.

As the team finished packing, the Colonel leaned against the lead truck and sighed while rubbing his eyes. His involvement in the program had always been relatively indirect. Logistics. Security. Cover-ups. He had only briefly interacted with Subject 7, but he was privy to the multitude of stories about the impudent boy and his fellow subjects.

His mind took him back to their first encounter, many years ago.

“Cute uniform. Are you here to try to recruit me?” The young boy had asked the military man standing in front of him. “I’ll be honest, I’m terrible at pushups. Will that be a problem?”

“I told you he was a funny one, Major Maddox,” one of the nearby scientists said.

“Wait, what?” The boy quickly replied. “*Major Maddox!*? What are you? A cartoon crimefighter?” He continued as he howled with laughter. “Major Maddox! I love it!”

“It’s Seven, correct?” The Major said, showing no signs of emotion as he glanced at down at the clipboard in his hand. He flipped over the first page and began to study the documents. “Impersonation, the ability to project your, or another’s, form in close or even extreme proximity...”

“So, what’s Mighty Mouse like?” Seven interrupted, still giggling uncontrollably. “Do you guys get to hang out much?”

The Major raised his eyes and glanced at the figure sitting against the wall. He was a small, thin boy with visible cuts and bruises on his exposed skin. He was wearing a simple and dirty garment resembling a hospital gown. For a moment, the military man felt a twinge of guilt. But only for a moment.

“They tell me you can’t remember who are you, is that right? No memories of where you’re from? Your family? Your friends?” Maddox asked with a slight smirk. “That’s a shame. But at least you still have your sense of humor.”

Seven stopped giggling and his smile disappeared completely. His eyes closed while another set of eyes opened.

Major Maddox gasped as the clipboard fell to the ground in front of him. He instinctively reached for his sidearm, forgetting that it had been left at the security desk. His eyes traveled up and down the figure now standing mere feet in front of him.

“What’s wrong, Major? Scared of your own reflection?” The newly-

formed Major Maddox asked his corporeal counterpart. He folded his arms against his chest and flashed a toothy grin.

The real Maddox continued to stand, mouth agape at the vision before him. It was the first time he was present for a display of Seven's power.

"Are we married, Major?" The ethereal figure asked, shooting a glance at the Major's right hand. A gold ring encircled a finger. "Maybe I could pay your wife a visit. I can't actually *touch* anyone, but I can be very convincing with my... tongue." His bright blue eyes practically glowed in the dark room. "Anything she's not doing for you?"

"That's enough Seven," a new voice said. It was cold and curt and came from just outside the room. "The Major isn't interested in your games."

Both Major Maddox's turned to look at the approaching gentlemen. He was wearing a white lab coat over his suit, which matched his stark, white hair.

"Dr. Brenner!" Both uniformed figures said at the same time before looking at each other. Only one of them was smiling.

"I won't say it again, Seven," Dr. Brenner continued. A metallic rod was visible in his right hand. At the moment it was simply dangling next to his leg as he walked toward the far wall.

"Oh, c'mon Marty. Don't be such a grouch. I'm just trying to show our guest a good time," Seven said through the Major's lips.

Dr. Brenner didn't reply. He simply continued to walk to the back of the room until he was standing over the body of the boy sitting against the wall. With a flick of a finger the cattle prod he was holding came to life. "Last chance," he said in an icy tone.

The Major continued to alter his gaze between the mirage in front of him and the boy on the floor. "What else can he do?" He asked, still in a state of mild shock. The jibe at his married life was ignored.

"Oh, I can sing, I can dance. I can pretend to give a fuck about..."

Unfortunately, the rest of Seven's remarks were cut short as the cattle prod made contact with his actual body. A wave of electricity coursed through his body, causing his eyes to open and another set of eyes to vanish.

"Errrrraaggghhh! There it is!" Seven yelled. He was laughing even though the pain was intense. He looked up at the Major who was looking down at him. "What's wrong Major? You look positively, *shocked!*"

Another stab of the prod and Seven was reduced to a crumpled mess on the floor. However, his laughter continued. "I tell ya, Major," Seven began, as he tried to push himself up by his arms. "These people have no sense of humor."

Dr. Brenner smiled as he turned toward the other man. "Seven is one of our more recent acquisitions. He's still adjusting to his new home." He turned off the prod and began walking back towards the doorway. "I think that's enough visiting for now. Come Major, there's so much more to see."

Maddox heard the doctor but continued to stare at the boy. Their eyes locked but no words were spoken between them. Both sets were blue, but the boy's were exceptionally piercing and commanding.

"Maddox? I said it's time to leave," Dr. Brenner said again. Still no response from the soldier.

"Maddox? Maddox!!"

Colonel Maddox jumped as he turned toward the sound of the voice. It was Dr. Pfeiffer, his arms full of folders and appearing even more flustered than before.

"What's wrong with you? I said it's time to leave," Dr. Pfeiffer said as he placed the pile of documents he was carrying into another suitcase. "Quit daydreaming."

"I wasn't... never mind," the Colonel said quickly, as he checked his watch once again. "Alright, let's move out!"

The snow was heavy and deep which hindered her progress. She was freezing even though she had taken extra care to bundle up. It seemed as though hours had passed during the silent journey over the snow-covered landscape. The woods were eerily quiet, which brought back horrible memories of the time spent alone.

El shook her head, trying to physically prevent those memories from breaking her concentration. She remembered how to get to the lab, but the darkness was causing her to constantly second-guess the route.

Finally, El noticed a break in the tree line. There was a space of pure white cutting between the woods. *The road*, she thought as she hurried towards the opening. It was covered in snow due to the lack of us, but it was still discernible.

El glanced up and down the road several times before making her way onto it. But then a voice inside her head made her stop.

Not safe. Could be seen. Back to the woods.

Another glance up and down the empty road. Followed by another. And another. She knew the voice was right. Even though no one was around, walking out in the open like that was just too dangerous. With a heavy sigh, El returned to the woods, shadowing the road as it snaked over the landscape.

More time passed. It was filled with thoughts of her friends. Of Hopper. Of Mike.

Mike.

He should be with you.

“No...” El said aloud, but quietly. Her pace quickened.

You said you would never leave him again.

“Not leaving...” El said again. her heart was beating hard against her chest.

You should have told him.

She shook her head as she continued moving faster and faster through the woods.

Friends don't lie.

“NO!” El screamed before immediately slapping a gloved-hand over her mouth. She stopped moving and listened. Only her heavy breathing disturbed the quiet which still surrounded her.

El bent over and removed her hand as she tried to suck in air and catch her breath. The cold air burned her lungs and her eyes were watery. After a minute, she righted herself and gasped at the sight in front of her.

A tall metal fence was straight ahead. And just off to the left, the imposing gate of the Hawkins Lab. El slowly walked towards the guard shack, hands tingling as her power vibrated inside of her. She was surprised to find the gate wide open, as if beckoning her to enter.

As El stood in front of the opening, she gazed up and the dark structure that loomed in the distance. There wasn't a single light on. No sign of anyone or anything.

Someone is in there, she thought as the hairs on the back of neck stood up. She could sense it.

Suddenly, an explosion of light blinded El as the entire complex was illuminated in an instant. She didn't fret about her audible gasp as she was transfixed by the sight of the now fully-lit building.

But El did not shrink back or turn away. Summoning all of her courage, she began marching up the path towards her former prison. Her clenched fists complemented her teeth as she noticed a sign stuck in the middle of the road. The words were obscured by snow, but El already knew what they read.

With just the slightest twitch of her head, the sign ripped itself apart into dozens of pieces. El continued straight past the pile of broken wood without a second glance.

As El approached the front doors, she couldn't stop her mind from taking her back to the events of the previous month. The monsters. Hopper. The gate.

El's hand hesitated, but only briefly, before touching the glass. In a flash she was back on the lift with Hopper. She had paid no attention to the blasts from his gun. Her focus was entirely on closing the pulsating gate in the distance. Raw power flowed out of her body as blood poured from her nose and ears.

The tendrils of the mind flayer reached out to her as the gate continued to close. El felt herself leave the ground with both hands outstretched in a final attempt to summon the last of her energy. It was getting closer to her. Closer and closer.

The ear-splitting sound of shattering glass brought El back to her senses. Her hand was now touching nothing but empty air as she surveyed the destruction in front of her. Not a single pane of glass remained intact on any of the doors.

El lowered her hand and carefully stepped over the shiny, sharp fragments covering the ground. And then she was inside. She was inside the lab once again.

"The doors were unlocked, you know. Now all the cold air is going to get in," a familiar voice said to her right.

El turned and gasped at the figure standing in the middle of the lobby. A wide and welcoming smile was displayed on the pleasing face. "Welcome home, Jane."

"C-come in Will, do you r-read me? Over," Mike whispered into the

Supercom through chattering teeth. It was freezing outside and he regretted not wearing a heavier shirt under his jacket.

“Yes, I’m here. I read you. Over,” Will replied within seconds. He was hobbling around his room instead of enjoying the warmth and comfort of his bed. His ankle hurt with every step, but he didn’t care.

They’re out there in the cold, he thought. I don’t deserve to relax.

“I can’t feel me feet!” Dustin suddenly exclaimed as his pace slowed. “It’s too cold.”

Lucas rolled his eyes and let out a heavy breath. Here he was, on yet another journey accompanied by a constantly complaining Dustin. “You have to keep moving to stay warm, dumbass!”

“I am moving! I’m moving as fast as I can. Look at all this snow!” Dustin shot back.

“Guys, c’mon. Keep your voices down, okay?” Mike was, as usual, leading the Party but was getting tired of having to turn around and admonish them.

Max was certain that no one was suffering as badly as she was. Her whole body was shaking but she refused to complain like Dustin. Every now and then, Lucas would rub her back which made her feel incredibly warm. Unfortunately, that feeling dissipated as soon as his hand broke contact with her cold body.

The Party continued to shuffle through the snow, more of which was continuing to fall from the sky. Mike secretly wished that Nancy, Jonathan and even Hopper were involved in this plan. They could have been driven to the lab instead of having to trek through the dark woods.

They wouldn’t have let you go, idiot, Mike told himself. And then Hopper would’ve taken El away. He shivered even harder.

He tried to imagine what El was doing right now. Maybe she was sitting on the couch watching TV, a warm fire crackling nearby. Or maybe she was already asleep, buried under a pile of blankets, dreaming pleasant dreams.

Or maybe she's watching you right now.

That thought almost caused Mike to gasp as he realized how possible that was. El said that she visited him every night when he spoke to her on the Supercom. He glanced down at the device in his hand as panic filled his body.

"We need to move faster!" Mike said as he turned to the others. He struggled to push back the coat from his wrist and decipher the digits on his watch. "It's already after 11! We're late!"

"Yeah, something tells me he's not going anywhere," Lucas replied as he once again began rubbing Max's back to her delight.

"You don't know that," Mike snapped. "This could be our only chance to..."

"HOLY SHIT!" Dustin screamed as he pointed past them.

His startled friends whipped their heads in the direction Dustin was pointing in. They gaped at the sight in silence. Where once was pitch black was now a glowing beacon of light, shining in all directions.

"That's.... that's the lab!" Lucas sputtered as he pushed past Mike. "It's totally lit up!"

"Oh my God, oh my God, oh my God..." Dustin mumbled over and over as he stared at the building in the distance.

Mike didn't say anything at first. A part of him was relieved that whatever *he* or *it* was, it was definitely still lurking at the lab. He ignored the other parts which were almost exclusively filled with fear.

"Let's go," Mike said, clearing his throat as he turned towards his friends. "We're almost there."

None of the others said anything as they fell in line behind Mike once again. Each of them was doing their best to prepare themselves for what was coming. They had already fought monsters together, but at least they had known something about them.

It all felt different to them this time. The monster they were heading into battle with was still a complete mystery. And during this fight, there would be no Eleven to save them.

Mike gritted his teeth as he continued to push his tired body forward.

This ends tonight. I promise.

El couldn't believe what she was seeing. She closed her eyes and re-opened them, doubting her senses. But nothing changed. The same person who she saw before was still standing there in the middle of the lobby. El attempted to speak, but no words came out.

The figure giggled, seemingly amused by Eleven's bewilderment. "It's alright, Jane. You don't need to be afraid of me."

"Not... afraid," El said slowly, finally able to find her words. "I... I saw you in that place. In my mind. In the void."

An almost imperceptible look of puzzlement flashed across the face in front of her before quickly disappearing. "Yes, you did. In the... *void*. You saw both of us there..." the person trailed off for a moment as if thinking intensely.

"I've been waiting for you, Jane," the figure continued while beginning to walk closer to El. "Do you remember my name?"

Jane remembered everything. The shaved head. The tattered gown. The scarred body. The tattoo. "Susie. Your name is Susie."

"Susie. Yes..." the petite girl replied, nodding as she continued to approach Jane. Her steps were oddly silent as she traversed the still blood-stained floor of the lobby. "Susie," she repeated. "But we go by other names, don't we Jane?"

The two girls were now separated by only a few feet. Jane continued to stare in awe and watched as Susie's eyes seemed to explore every inch of her.

"They called me Four. And they called you Eleven." Susie said with a smile that seemed a bit too forced. "Let's play a game, Jane. Do you like games?"

Jane was transfixed by every word the girl uttered. Once again, she seemed at a complete loss for what to say. "I... I don't know any games," she finally stated.

"Oh, this game is easy," Susie responded with a wide grin. "It's called 'I'll show you mine if you show me yours.' Here, I'll go first." And with that, Susie turned her arm over, exposing a new patch of scarred skin and three black digits over her wrist.

Jane didn't understand why she was shocked by the sight once again. She had already seen the tattooed girl in the void. But something felt different to her this time. It seemed so much more real.

Just like Kali, Jane thought to herself before her eyes widened.

"Kali!" she exclaimed at once. "You know Kali?" Jane then hesitated for a moment before continuing. "Eight. She was Eight," she continued, pointing at her Susie's wrist.

Susie's smile didn't waiver. "Of course I know Kali. And don't worry, she's just fine." She paused for a second before speaking further. "Steven feels badly about what he wrote on that sign. He sometimes gets angry and doesn't realize that what he says or does hurts others."

Steven, Jane thought. *The boy with Susie!*

"Steven. That boy with you," Jane began. She was desperately trying to make sense of everything. "Is he here? With you?"

Another experiment? Another number? Like us?

"Yes, Jane. He's here with me," Susie responded with a giggle. "But we still have to finish our game. I showed you mine," she said,

gesturing at her tattooed wrist. "Now it's time for you to show me yours."

Jane looked down at her still gloved hands and winter jacket. The gloves had been Nancy's. The jacket was Mike's. These items of clothing brought her not just physical, but emotional warmth. She wished that she still had the hat Mrs. Byers had made for her, but it was still lost in the woods. For this trip, Jane had borrowed one of Hopper's giant wool hats, which completely covered her head down to her eyes.

"You can leave your jacket and things here," Susie said, seeming to read Jane's mind. "We'll go someplace warmer to chat."

Slowly and with some hesitation, Jane began removing her winter apparel. First the gloves, one by one, followed by the hat. She felt embarrassed by the way Susie stared at her hair as it fell around her face. Hair that had been growing longer and longer by the month.

Jane's eyes found their way back to Susie's shaved head. Looking at the girl was like looking at her past self in a mirror. It caused her hands to tremble as she began to unzip the jacket. Soon, a pile of clothing was piled at her side. Jane was left in her sweater which, unsurprisingly, was yet another article of clothing acquired from the Wheeler Household. It was too big for her but it was warm and smelled of Mike.

Mike.

The sudden thought of Mike made Jane freeze in place. She was suddenly filled with a familiar feeling of sadness and fear. Here she was back in the lab, the place where she was imprisoned and tortured her entire life. The place where she had almost died. The place that was responsible for so much pain and suffering for Mike and his family and friends.

You said you would never leave again. You lied.

"Are you okay, Jane?" Susie asked as her eyes traveled down Jane's body to her arms and finally to that one particular wrist.

Jane blinked rapidly as her focus shifted back to reality. “Yes, okay,” she answered quietly as she looked down at her wrist. She pulled at the sleeve of her sweater. Inch by inch, the fabric moved up her arm, quickly revealing the three black digits. They were still as clear as ever. Jane turned her arm toward Susie while taking a step forward.

Four gazed down at the dark impressions before raising her eyes to meet Jane’s. “Welcome home, Eleven. Now follow me. There’s so much to discuss and so little time left,” she said, turning on the spot and heading towards the open door on their right. A clock on the far wall displayed the current time: 11:24.

With a quick look back at the shattered glass doors, Eleven began walking away from the pile of discarded clothes. She watched as Four passed through the doorway and began walking down one of the building’s many long hallways.

A familiar and sickening smell filled Eleven’s nostrils as she finally crossed the threshold. Even after the monsters attacked the facility and left it covered in blood, that sterile and unsettling scent persisted.

Eleven quickened her pace as she tried to catch up to Four. She didn’t want to be left alone in this terrible place. She had already experienced enough solitary confinement in the building.

“Let me tell you a story, Eleven.” Four’s voice echoed down the empty hallway. “It’s a story about the pursuit of power. The desire to control and manipulate. The idea that the ends justify the means.”

Eleven had caught up to Four and was walking a few steps back to her right. She was struggling to make sense of what Four was saying. Beyond that, memories of this building were flooding back into her mind. Eleven’s eyes kept darting around the hallway. The place looked dirtier and more cluttered than she remembered. Exposed wires were crisscrossing the ceiling.

“Humans are never satisfied with what they have,” Four continued. “More resources, more land, more wealth, more, more, more. Always more. So how does one get more?” she asked, glancing back at Eleven. “You take it. But what if someone already possess what you

want? Well, then you kill them first and then you take it.”

The pair reached another open door leading to a stairwell. Without hesitation, Four passed through the doorway and began heading upstairs. Eleven followed behind but stopped as her senses were attacked by a powerful smell. It burned her throat and made her feel woozy. However, even though something in the back of her mind was warning her not to, she proceeded forward.

“That’s called war, Eleven. Humans fighting other humans.” Four continued to ascend the stairs as she spoke. “But humans are pretty evenly matched in terms of physical ability, so we create weapons to help us kill. The humans with the best weapons kill the most and get to take the most.” She paused before turning to meet Eleven’s eyes once again. “That’s where we come in.”

More stairs. Eleven was still feeling winded from her long journey through the snow. Entering the source of all her nightmares and fears coupled with the nauseating odor filling the stairwell wasn’t making the trek upstairs any easier. She noted that for a girl who appeared so thin and weak, Four seemed to have no trouble moving so quickly.

“You and me. Four and Eleven. We were both part of a government experiment to develop a new type of weapon: Humans with special abilities intended to spy on other humans, to trick them, to manipulate them and, of course, to kill them.” Four was unable to contain a chuckle as she stopped at the landing.

They were on the fourth floor according to the sign posted nearby. Streaks of blood covered the surrounding wall of another open door. The blood seemed fresher than what they had walked passed earlier.

Eleven was sweating and realized that she was still wearing her scarf. She removed the soft cotton garment and placed it gently over the railing, making a mental note to grab it on the way back.

“You met Eight but you never met the rest of us. Well, not in *person* anyway,” Four said as she stared at Eleven. “One, two, three, five, six...” she paused for a second before continuing on. “...seven, nine and ten. There were many others like us once.”

Eleven took a deep breath before finally joining the conversation. "The others like us," she began. "Where... where are they?"

"Ahh, that's a great question," Four replied with a smirk before walking through the door and turning left. "This way, Eleven."

Eleven hurried to catch up once again, feeling annoyed that she didn't get an answer. Her eyes glanced at the blood. She hoped that she wouldn't encounter further reminders of what had taken place here recently. But then she entered the fourth-floor hallway and she was reminded once again.

Blood. Everywhere blood. Eleven's eyes went wide as her knees went weak and silent screams filled her throat.

"They're dead, Eleven. They're all dead."

Mike raced through the open gate as the others protested as quietly as possible.

"Mike, get back here!" Lucas hissed as he and the others remained hidden behind the guard shack.

"What the Hell is he doing? Has he lost his mind?" Dustin whispered.

"Well, there goes the element of surprise," Max grumbled as she absentmindedly pressed herself against Lucas. She was pretty sure that she had frostbite by this point.

Fucking reckless Paladin, Lucas thought silently as he watched Mike continue toward the building. And then suddenly, Mike stopped in his tracks. It looked like he was searching the ground around him.

"You guys!" Mike shouted, abandoning any last semblance of sneakiness. "Look at this!" He continued, turning back towards his

friend who were looking at him with annoyance. But Mike didn't care. He was only concerned about one thing. "Just get over here!"

Through mumbled curses, Dustin, Lucas and Max abandoned their hiding spot and lumbered up the snow-covered driveway.

"We could at least *pretend* like we're trying to avoid being seen," Lucas said as they finally reached Mike. "Oh... shit."

The rest of the Party now saw what had caught Mike's attention in such a way. The sight of some broken wood was not overly significant to Max, but Lucas and Dustin were taken aback.

"The... the sign!" Dustin exclaimed, spinning around and looking at the ground around them. "It was right there!" He continued, pointing to a mound of snow near Mike. "But now it's everywhere! It's completely destroyed!"

"What the Hell is going on?" Lucas asked to no one in particular. "It looks like it was blown up or something. Who could've done...?"

And then his eyes met Mike's. And then Dustin's. And then Mike was running again. And so were they.

Notes for the Chapter:

An entire month without an update. Whoops... Well, sometimes life gets busy ha. The good news is that, once again, I'm adding another chapter to this story. It will be 13 chapters now. This one grew to over 11,000 words, which was waaay too long based on what the other ones are. I basically split the super long chapter into two, so this is 'part 1.' The other good news is that 12 is already written, so there will be another update next week. The conclusion will be soon after. I just need to write it...

So, all the characters are either back at the lab or heading towards it. Some will meet for the first time, some will meet for the last time. We're getting close

to the end of this journey. I hope you're all still enjoying the ride. Thank you for reading!

12. The Queen's Gambit

Summary for the Chapter:

Max gripped the switchblade in her hand even tighter as she stepped forward. The three friends were only a few feet behind Mike and El, but they weren't looking at the pair. Their focus was on the doorway in front of them. The one with light pouring out from it. The one with a person now standing by its side.

A life should not be black or white,

A death cannot wrong a right,

A life is precious, hold it tight,

A death is messy, a bloody sight.

The floor. The walls. Even parts of the ceiling. There was blood everywhere. El struggled to behold the gruesome spectacle. Her eyes darted back and forth as she tried desperately to make sense of the multitude of images and words surrounding her.

Susie studied El a bit before speaking. "Cavemen... Oh, cavemen are humans who lived in caves thousands and thousands of years ago," she quickly added in an effort to help El understand. "Cavemen used to draw on the walls of their caves. They drew pictures of themselves, animals, nature and things like that. The pictures helped to document their experiences and keep their memories alive."

Susie stopped near one of the drawings and gave an approving snicker. "I'm not sure if they used blood, but uhh... Well, every artist has their own instrument, right?" She asked rhetorically. "Use what you're most familiar with I suppose."

El watched Susie sway along the hallway, looking completely at ease and almost gleeful. She couldn't understand how someone could act

so calm in a place so horrifying.

Did she draw it all?

“This is our story, Jane! *Eleven!*” Susie continued in a singsong voice. “This is the story of me. Of you. Of our brothers and sisters whose bodies were broken and whose blood was spilled within these walls and within the walls of every other building like it”

“Other building,” El repeated, seizing on those words. “More like this one?” She couldn’t believe that could be true. “With other bad men?”

No. Can’t be more. Not true, she silently pleaded.

“Oh yes, Jane. There were more,” Susie replied as she continued to stroll casually down the hall. “Probably still are some left, too. Big buildings with long, bright hallways with metal doors and men in white coats and screaming subjects and floors drenched in red.”

El’s head whipped back and forth as her heart pounded harder and harder against her chest. There were too many words. She couldn’t understand the messages.

‘But then he refused, and then there was none.’

But for some reason, El felt compelled to walk towards the sound of Susie’s humming.

‘She’d enter your mind and erase it, it’s true,’

There was a bright light at the end of the hallway. Susie was leading her closer and closer to it.

‘A silvery blade was brought to implore,’

El continued to follow the girl as if under a spell.

‘Stupendous, successful, sensational Seven,’

“Jaaannne, follow meee Jane!” Susie sang as she twirled around.

'She's killing them now, reversing her fate.'

El was straining to focus on any one thing for more than a second. There were faces on the walls staring back at her with blood red eyes.

"Just a little further Elleeveen!" Susie continued to giggle as she skipped over the blood-stained floor.

And then the light from the open door was washing over El. On the wall next to it, the final words written at the end of this hallway of horrors became visible. El stopped and read them in their entirety.

The words glowed a vivid crimson. The blood looked fresh.

Open the gate, three cheers for subject Eleven,

*Just so **PRETTY** and **PERFECT**, our savior from heaven,*

Her Papa so proud of the powers she was given,

"This is your story, Eleven," Susie whispered in her ear. "Well, it's your story so far. There's still room for another line. What would you like me to write?" And with that, Susie vanished, leaving a very confused and distraught Eleven behind.

No, no, no, no, no, no...

The word 'no'. Over and over. It was the only word going through Michael Wheeler's brain as he sprinted into the brightly lit lobby. He wanted the answer to be *no*. But he knew it was *yes*.

The destroyed sign. The shattered glass doors. His old winter jacket.

Nancy's hand-me-down gloves. A heavy winter hat that seemed just like something the Chief would wear.

Mike fell to his knees as he grasped at the clothing. He could barely hear the voices of his friends over the constant screaming inside his head.

No, no, NO, NO, NO!!!!

"El... she came back here on her own!?" Dustin asked in disbelief. "Why would she do that?"

All alone because you didn't tell her. Mike closed his eyes.

"You know why," Lucas replied as he approached Mike. "Mike, c'mon man, get up. We'll find El, okay?"

You wanted to keep it a secret. Mike's breathing was ragged as he continued to hold his jacket - *El's jacket* - in a death-grip.

"Mike, it's just her jacket and stuff. It's not her," Max said in as calm as a voice as she could muster. "Look, if she was in trouble, why would she stop to take these off?"

You'd do anything to keep her from disappearing again. He shook his head back and forth, trying in vain to silence the voice.

"Yeah, that's true," Lucas replied, nodding at Max with approval. "She's gotta be close by."

If she left, you'd be alone again. Mike's hands were trembling.

"We'll find her," Dustin added. "And then we'll have our mage again! We'll be unstoppable!"

She's the only one. Nobody else would ever love you. Mike was spiraling.

"Shut up, Dustin!" Lucas said. That wasn't what their friend needed to hear right now.

But Mike barely heard them. He was too busy drowning in his

thoughts. Mike had purposely not informed the others about the plan. Not Nancy. Not Jonathan. Not the Chief. Not El. Especially not El. He thought it was the only way to keep them all safe. And, most importantly, to keep El in his life.

But now she's here. Are you just gonna cry or act like a real Paladin? The tone of the voice had changed. It was challenging him.

Mike's eyes flew open as he let go of the jacket. He was back on his feet a second later, scanning the room. A path of wet footprints was visible on the ground leading off to the right. The footprints led to a propped-open door in the far corner.

It's not about you, it's about her. She needs help. Everyone's help. The voice

Mike quickly pulled the Supercom from his bag and spoke into it slowly and with determination. "Will, it's Mike. Do you copy? Over?"

Static.

"Will, are you there? Over?" Mike asked again, tapping the side of the device nervously. *We're out of range*, he thought.

"Mi... it's Will... Hard to hea... Ove..." Will's voice was barely perceptible over the static.

Oh thank God, Mike thought as he sucked in a breath.

"Will, listen. We're at the lab. El is here too. I need you to tell..." Mike paused.

What if he takes her away? Forever... Doubt had returned almost as quickly as it had left. But Mike didn't falter.

No, it'll all be over tonight and then she'll be safe, he told himself through gritted teeth.

"I need you to tell everyone," Mike began. "Your mom, Jonathan, the Chief. Tell them we're here and we need help. Over." He knew that he had done what was right. He just hoped Will had received the

message.

“El is the...? ...ou want... ell... everyo...? Mi... are you... ure? Ov...” Will replied a few seconds later.

“Yes! Tell. Everyone. Need. Help. Now. Over. And. Out!” Mike said each word carefully. When he was done, he spun around and spoke to his stunned friends.

“We know El’s here,” Mike said turning towards his friends. “And so are we and the others will come too. We find El, we find out who’s been messing with us and we end it. We end all of this tonight. For good. Agreed?”

“Agreed,” the others said in unison.

“Good. Weapons out. We have to be prepared for whatever’s waiting for us inside.” Mike’s steady voice surprised his friends after what they had just witnessed, but they weren’t about to question him. Each of the Party quickly armed themselves with what they had.

Wrist rocket. Flashlight. Switchblade. Wrench.

Since when do Paladins wield wrenches? The voice mocked him.

Mike looked down at the tool in his right hand and his newly-found confidence wavered once again. Thankfully, that moment of doubt passed quickly and his gaze returned to the open door. With a deep breath, he began marching towards it.

One by one, the members of the Party walked through the doorway and entered the long, bleak hallway. They all hoped El was close by. And nobody else.

El had dropped to her knees and wrapped her arms around her body. The combination of physical and emotional exhaustion was finally

taking its toll on the young girl. It had been too much information to process all at once. Other facilities. Even more test subjects. The messages in blood.

They're all dead.

An audible gasp escaped her mouth as that terrible thought tore at her heart. El recalled all the years she had suffered alone. But it wasn't just her who had been imprisoned and abused by the bad men. Kali. Susie. All of the others. They were all just tools. Weapons.

El began sobbing where she knelt, just in front of the door. There was no more singing. All she heard was the faint call of her name.

"Eleven!"

She ignored it, continuing to hold herself tight.

"El!"

There it was again. Her name shouted again. Louder this time and echoing down the hallway. But this time it had just been *El*. Her *nickname*.

El thought about the first time someone had called her anything but 'Eleven.' It was the boy who had rescued her from the cold and the rain. He had given her clothes. He had given her shelter. He had given her a new name.

"EL!!!"

El's eyes flew open as she recognized the voice. It wasn't Susie's. It was *him*.

"Mike!" El screamed as she twisted her body around. And there he was. Still mostly bundled up in winter clothes, face red, breathing heavily, carrying something odd looking in his right hand.

Mike had resisted the urge to throw himself at El the moment he saw her face. Instead, he quickly took off his backpack and placed the wrench he still held on the ground before walking over to her. He slowly knelt down and stared into the girl's brown eyes.

“El, I was so worried. I... I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry,” Mike said, trying desperately to hold back tears.

The others were keeping their distance, but it didn’t even seem as though El had noticed them yet. In any regard, they were too engrossed with the bloodied hallway to pay much attention to the reunion.

El looked closely at the boy with the freckled face and wisps of black hair hanging out of his winter hat.

Mike? Real Mike?

The boy’s kind and loving eyes told her everything she needed to know in an instant. “Mike!” El screamed before embracing him. Their arms wrapped around each other as they drank in the warmth from their bodies.

“I’m so sorry, El,” Mike repeated as he sniffled against her shoulder. “I... I should have told you about the plan.”

“The plan?” El asked, pulling back from Mike a bit. Her eyes narrowed a bit and her brow furrowed in confusion.

Mike tried to find the right words as he continued to stare at her in awe.

Pretty.

“Uhh... yea, umm I, I mean, we,” Mike added, gesturing to the other friends who El finally noticed. “We came here because of that uhh... thing that you and Will saw. Dustin and Lucas found a message on a sign outside the lab. It’s not there anymore...” Mike trailed off as he looked back into El’s eyes.

El remembered the sign. “Yes, I saw it. I broke it,” she said matter-of-factly.

“Oh, uhh... okay,” Mike replied quickly. “So yea, we uhh... we thought it was you and then we saw the broken glass and your clothes...” Mike was in the midst of another ramble. “...and then we wanted to find you before that thing or whatever did and I followed

your wet footsteps to the stairs and then we saw your scarf and... and then I saw you at the end of this hallway and..."

"Mike..."

"...and there's all this blood and I didn't know if you were hurt and..."

"Mike!" El said again, more forcefully this time. She couldn't resist cracking a slight smile as she listened to him stumbling over his words. "I'm okay." Then she paused for a moment before continuing.

"Why didn't you tell me? That you were coming here?" El asked, with more confusion than sadness in her eyes.

The questions crushed Mike. His concern about losing El again had resulted in her leaving on her own, which was even worse. "I wanted to keep you safe," he mumbled quietly as he averted his eyes. "And I... I didn't want to lose you again."

It was El's turn to feel a twinge of pain and regret. She had promised Mike that she would never leave him again, and then she took off to the most dangerous place in Hawkins by herself. She thought about what Hopper would say if he knew where they were.

"Stupid," El finally said.

Mike looked back at her with eyes wide and mouth agape. "S-stupid? I'm stupid?"

El grinned at the panic-stricken boy. "Yes. You were stupid. But I was stupid too. Both stupid," she said as she leaned forward and pressed her forehead against his. They let out a collective sigh as their skin made contact.

"Both stupid," Mike repeated. "I can live with that."

"Mike! El!" They heard Dustin voice but they didn't seem to care.

"Guys, behind you! Watch out!" Lucas said at almost the same time.

Max gripped the switchblade in her hand even tighter as she stepped

forward. The three friends were only a few feet behind Mike and El, but they weren't looking at the pair. Their focus was on the doorway in front of them. The one with light pouring out from it. The one with a person now standing by its side.

"Well, that was just about the cutest thing I've ever seen," the figure said in a voice that Mike and El both recognized immediately. "And trust me, I've seen some cute shit in my life."

Mike and El quickly pulled apart and stumbled backwards away from the door as they gazed up at the person standing before them.

It was a teenaged-looking boy with dirty-blond hair wearing a pale blue suit. His radiant blue eyes were particularly striking this night.

"Jane. Michael," he said nodding at each of them individually. "And friends," he continued as he smiled at the trio standing in the background.

El sprang to her feet as Mike frantically tried to do the same. She had immediately tensed up at the mention of her real name.

"Steven," El replied in a quiet but steady voice.

"Wait, what!? You know him?" Mike practically yelled the questions as he stared at El in shock.

El didn't alter her gaze. She remained focused on Steven. It was the version of him that she had first seen in the void. Handsome, clean and fake.

Not real, she thought before replying to Mike. "Saw him. In the void."

It was him again. Susie wasn't real. Is any of it? El was filled with even more questions and confusion than before.

"Guys, what the Hell is going on?" Lucas asked in bewilderment. His wrist rocket was prepped and ready to send a rock straight into the head of whoever or whatever 'Steven' was.

"In the void?" Mike recalled how El was able to find people and to

see in that mysterious place. “You!” he exclaimed, pointing at Steven. “You were the one in my room at the hospital! You’re the one who’s been fucking with all of us!”

“Whoa, watch the language Mikey,” Steven snorted. “You’re in the presence of a lady.” His eyes traveled up and down El while he spoke. “And she’s such a pretty lady, don’t you agree?”

Pretty. It was a word that Mike had used to describe how El looked before they snuck her inside their school. She had worn Nancy’s old dress, a blonde wig and some makeup. But it wasn’t those things that made him use that word. It was El. Mike had always thought she was pretty regardless of what she wore. Tonight was no different.

But Mike wasn’t thinking about El in that moment. His only thoughts were of the wrench held tightly in his grasp once again and the face of the monster who had dared to use that special word. Before anyone else could react, Mike lunged forward at Steven with as much force as his body could produce.

Steven chuckled as Mike rushed towards him, arm raised in anger. He didn’t blink as the boy swung. He didn’t flinch as the wrench in the outstretched hand neared his skull. He grinned as it made contact.

And then everyone watched as the wrench passed straight through Steven as if he wasn’t standing there at all.

The silence of the woods was interrupted by the rumbling of two large trucks. The snow-covered roads did little to impede their progress. Most of the men inside them sat in relative silence, doing their best to stay warm.

“Not much further now, sir,” the driver of the lead truck said to the man in the passenger seat.

“Hmm? Oh, yes. Almost there...” Colonel Maddox mumbled as he

continued to stare out the window. It was an especially dark night due to the thick storm clouds above. As the minutes continued to tick by, his gaze held steady. And then a flash of light in the distance made him gasp.

There was now a glowing light on the horizon. It had appeared suddenly and completely out of nowhere.

“How far exactly are we from the objective?” Maddox asked as he leaned forward and squinted his eyes.

“It’s a bit over ten clicks from the intersection we just passed, sir,” the drive replied. His focus was also drawn to the new sight.

“That’s it. That’s the facility,” the Colonel concluded immediately. He grabbed the radio receiver from its holder and began speaking briskly into it. “Destination in sight, ten clicks out. Check gear and prepare to move out. Expect multiple targets.”

He heard a rustle as the men in the back began to prepare to disembark. Four people in each vehicle. Eight in total including himself and the Doctor. He knew it would’ve been too risky to assemble a larger team.

More than enough to deal with Seven, the Colonel thought to himself. *Hopefully enough to subdue Eleven...*

The beacon of light was steadily growing larger. It would only be a few more minutes until he walked through those doors once again. It had been years, but he hadn’t forgotten the place.

He remembered the long hallways, the sterile laboratories, that sickening smell of chemicals and cleaner. And blood. He specifically remembered the blood.

There was always blood. And he had a feeling there would be even more spilled that night.

Mike had put everything he had into the assault on Steven. He had timed his swing correctly and he knew that his aim was perfect. But it was what he didn't know that had doomed the attack from the outset.

Quite unexpectedly, Mike found himself face-down on the cold, hard floor. His wrench had struck the ground with a thunderous clang before flying from his hand.

Dustin, Lucas and Max all stood in silence with mouths agape at what they had just witnessed. El appeared less surprised, although she quickly rushed over to the dazed boy lying on the floor.

"Ughhh," Mike moaned as he turned himself over. "My head..." The headache he had experienced over the weekend had returned with a vengeance.

"Mike!" El yelled as she knelt down next to him. She grasped his shoulders and tried to prop him up. "Are you okay?"

"Wha... what just happened?" Max asked as the boys standing next to her continued to look on in disbelief.

El turned to the girl in the heavy winter coat and hat, holding what looked like a knife in her right hand. "He's not real," she said as she pointed at Steven, who was still standing by the doorway and looking quite bemused. He decided to keep out of the discussion for now.

El thought about how best to explain everything better. "Remember when I said I was in the woods at night with Mike but it wasn't Mike. That isn't him. He's not real."

"And just like with Will!" Dustin chimed in before his eyes widened even further. "Holy shit! Astral projection!" He shouted as he punched Lucas in the shoulder.

"Ow! What was that for?" Lucas asked angrily as the punch brought him back to his senses.

"Astral projection!" Dustin said again, returning his gaze to Steven

who was smiling back at him. "You're not a real person. You're just a projection of one."

As all eyes turned towards Dustin, Lucas recalled a conversation in the school cafeteria a few weeks ago. It was the day of the Snow Ball and Dustin had gotten all worked up over the concept of astral projection and how it would work.

"That is correct," Steven said through another chuckle. "This is not my true form." He looked down at Eleven and Mike and sighed. "If you'd like to see the real me then please, step into my office," he continued while extending his left arm towards the open door.

None of the members of the Party moved as Steven turned and began walking into the brightly lit room. He then turned his head to the boy on the floor. Mike was now propped up against the girl whose life was so intertwined with each of theirs.

"Oh, and you can leave the wrench, Mike. I'm unarmed." And with a final laugh, Steven vanished.

Mike and El finally rose to their feet, Mike just a little more slowly than El, and stared at each other. It only took a few seconds before he threw his arms around her, pulling her in close. He ignored the pounding in his head.

"I'm alright, Mike," El said as she breathed in deeply before pulling away. She then turned to her other friends for the first time and smiled. "You all came to fight for me?"

"We wanted to keep you safe," Dustin said quickly. "I mean, you already saved us like a dozen times."

"Yea, that's right," Lucas chimed in. "It's not fair that you have to keep fighting every monster that shows up around here."

El's smile widened before disappearing rapidly as another thought crossed her mind. "The others?" She asked, looking back at Mike. "Hopper? Does he know...?" Her heart skipped a beat.

"No! It's just us..." Mike, interrupted before remembering what he had just told Will only minutes earlier.

Oh, crap...

“Uhh... well, maybe they know. We didn’t want...” He hesitated as he felt the sweat above his brow. “Uhh... *I* didn’t want to tell him because I was worried he would hide you again and... and then...”

“And then who would you get to kiss?” Max said to herself. Or so she thought. She immediately realized her mistake once everyone whipped their heads around at her. “Uhh... well, I mean it’s true,” she said with smirk.

Max’s unintentional remark seemed to briefly lighten the mood. Dustin and Lucas began to snicker and even El couldn’t help but smile when she gazed up at the crimson-faced Mike. But the moment passed and El knew there was something that needed to be done. She suddenly stepped away from Mike and faced the doorway.

“El, wait! We’ll go in together,” Mike said as he took ahold of her hand. “C’m on guys, let’s end this for good.” He glanced at the wrench on the ground but only briefly before focusing on El’s hand in his. El was still staring straight ahead.

Finish the fight.

She heard the voice in the back of her head as she walked hand-in-hand with Mike through the doorway. Their friends followed close behind, weapons still drawn.

The room was a mess. Furniture was piled up against the walls and there were boxes and all manner of supplies strewn everywhere. A large table in the center of the room was covered in papers and seemingly everything was tainted with blood splatter.

“Eww, this place is disgusting,” Max said as she tried to avoid brushing against anything.

“Yea, does he actually live here?” Dustin added, glancing at an overflowing garbage can.

“Wow, you guys are terrible guests, you know that?” A shaky voice said from the far corner of the room. “First, Mike tries to bludgeon me with a wrench and then the rest of you insult my decor? Not

nice.”

The Party members looked over to the corner of the room where a chair was beginning to turn. El continued to walk forward with Mike as the true form of Steven was finally revealed.

Steven looked worse than what El remembered from the void. His skin was so pale it was practically translucent and appeared to be adorned with additional scars. The painfully thin body was dressed in tattered rags stained with both dried and fresh blood. A trickle of red was still escaping his nostrils.

“Eleven,” Steven said, as he pushed himself onto his feet. Even that small movement seemed difficult for him. “I guess I should formally introduce myself. Although I prefer Steven, my true designation is Seven.”

Once again, the others were caught completely off guard by another shocking and ghastly sight. It was Mike who spoke up first.

“Seven? You mean like a test subject? Like El?” He asked, looking back and forth between him and the girl whose hand he was still gripping tightly.

“Yes, just like that,” Seven replied with a smirk. “Just like *EL*.”

El pulled herself out of Mike’s grasp and closed the distance between her and Seven. She noticed how much smaller he was than the figure he usually presented, especially with the bald head. Even his eyes lacked their usual luster.

Those paler eyes stayed focused on El as she stood in front of him. She was years younger than him but almost the same height. Seven stared at her brown eyes as he recalled the eyes he used to gaze longingly into.

Slowly, El raised her hand and reached out to Seven. She sucked in a breath when she finally made contact with his cold flesh.

This is real. This is him.

El took ahold of his thin hand and gently turned his arm around.

There, just above the wrist, was what El expected to find. Three digits in bold, black ink: **007**.

“Why?” El asked, as her eyes stayed focused on the numbers. “Why did you pretend to be Mike and Dustin and... Susie? Why did you lie?”

For the first time in a very long time, Seven was briefly rendered speechless. He looked at the girl in front of him, a fellow test subject, and all he could think about was how much she reminded him of that other girl. That girl who he had loved.

It was the combination of El’s soft features, her brown eyes, her wavy hair, her gentle touch. It was all so familiar. Seven could feel warmth surge through his body as she held him. He thought about why he done those things. He knew there were several reasons.

Anger. Jealousy. Despair. Fear. He rattled the feelings off one by one in his mind.

Any of them. All of them.

“I... I was angry. I was angry at the people who did this to us. Angry at the world for letting it happen. Angry at myself for what I had to do to survive, what I had to sacrifice...” El rubbed her thumb over the tattoo and his entire body shuddered. No one had ever touched him like this in the real world.

“And when I came back here... to Hawkins. I saw you,” Seven continued. “I saw you at that dance. You looked so...” he shot a quick look at Mike before his eyes turned back at El. “...so *normal*. You looked like a regular kid having fun, enjoying life, experiencing... *love*. I guess I was jealous.”

“Jealous?” El asked, continuing to hold Seven’s hand.

“It means I wanted to have you had. Wanted to do what you were doing,” Seven explained. “And because I couldn’t, I got mad. And I have a tendency to lose my temper and make bad decisions when I’m angry.”

“You pretended to be me to scare her!” Mike shouted, unable to stay

silent any longer. "And then you impersonated Dustin to mess with Will and he got hurt in the woods! And then you made Nancy crash her car when we..."

"That wasn't exactly planned," Seven interjected, feeling smaller by the minute. He couldn't believe the effect El was having on him. "And I'm sorry about the rest of it but you have to understand..."

"Understand what?" Lucas asked, wrist rocket still in hand. "You were just trying to keep us away from El so you could go after her!"

El looked into Seven's eyes. They appeared even darker than moments ago. It was as if they were beginning to fade away entirely.

"Yeah, we're not stupid you know," Dustin added, briefly pointing his flashlight at Seven and flicking it on. The bright light made the boy squint. "We knew what you were planning!"

"We did?" Max asked incredulously, fully aware that they didn't have a clue.

"Damn it Max, we need to interrogate him!" Dustin replied. "I'm the bad cop and Lucas is... uhh well he's the bad cop too." He looked over at Mike before continuing. "And I guess Mike is another bad cop... umm. Maybe El is the good cop?"

El didn't try to understand what they meant. Unbeknownst to her, she was doing extremely well at getting Seven to open up to them.

"I'm not here to hurt Eleven," Seven said as something outside the windows caught his attention.

Here we go...

"But... but they are."

El dropped Seven's hand and followed his gaze. The others rushed forward at the same time, practically pressing their faces against the glass. Seven stumbled back over to his chair and sat down with a groan.

"Who?" Mike asked as he watched two lines of figures making their

way towards the building. Their white clothing rendered them practically invisible. He wondered how Seven had spotted them so easily. "Who are they?"

"Who do you think, Mike?" Steven asked sardonically. "It's the government. Your government. My government. Eleven's government. It's the people who are responsible for everything terrible that's happened to each and every one of us for the past... forever."

El stared at the approaching figures as she felt the panic rising within her. It was panic mixed with anger and hate.

The bad men, she thought. They came back.

"It was the only way," Seven continued. He noticed that El's hands were now balled up into fists. "They wouldn't have come if it was just me. They don't care about me anymore. But Eleven... They really want her back."

In an instant, the chair containing Seven was thrown back against the wall. The loud noise echoed throughout the room causing everyone in the room to jump and yell in surprise. Everyone except El.

"Jesus Christ!"

"What the shit!?"

"El!"

El wasn't paying attention to anyone except the boy in the chair. Her arm extended outward automatically and she could almost feel Seven's body go rigid as he was enveloped within her powers.

"You told them to come!" El screamed at him as she walked forward. "You hurt my friends and you made the bad men come back!"

Seven didn't struggle or attempt to free himself. He knew what powers El possessed. He was no match for her. No one was. And that was the point.

"You can hurt me if you want," Seven replied as he gasped for air.

“But that won’t stop them.”

El continued to approach Seven while continuing to ignore her friends.

“Susie could see you couldn’t she? In that... that *void*.” Seven’s vision was getting a bit hazy as he choked on his words. “She... she saw you... spoke to you. What did she say?” Seven thought back to that final encounter in the blackness. It was the last time he ever saw Susie. It was by far the worst day of his miserable life.

El’s arm dropped as she took in Seven’s words, releasing him from her power. The boy gasped as air flooded back into his lungs.

It was almost like she was there again. There in the void. Standing in the darkness and listening to the tortured girl speak to her.

The lab... Finish the fight... He’ll find you... Promise me...

“Finish the fight,” El said quietly, but loud enough that everyone in the room heard. “She said to finish the fight.”

Seven smiled as he heard those words. “Yes, that sounds like something she would say,” he said while staring up at Eleven. “So, will you?”

The lights on the trucks were turned off as they approached the compound. Parking just outside the gates, the clandestine team quickly exited the vehicles and assembled near the fence.

“Maddox, we need to get in there immediately!” Dr. Pfeiffer said as he observed the glowing building. “It’s already after midnight and who knows what’s happening inside. We can’t risk losing Eleven again!”

Colonel Maddox stared at the bundled-up old man with disdain.

“That’s correct. We don’t know what the current situation is so we need to proceed with caution and...”

“It’s too late for caution! We should’ve been here hours ago,” the doctor interrupted. “If we had arrived on time, you could’ve used all of your fancy military tactics. But we’re out of time and we’re going in now. And that’s an order!”

An order? The Colonel mused. This idiot is going to get us all killed. Hopefully just himself...

“Very well,” Maddox replied, turning towards the others. “Two lines, either side of the road. Stay low, hold position in front of the main doors. The girl is the primary target, do not engage unless I give the order. Non-lethal force only. The boy is expendable. If he gets in the way, take him down. Move out!”

Within seconds, two columns of men entered the Department of Energy compound which was still bathed in light. The Colonel would have preferred a far stealthier approach, but he was not, as Dr. Pfeiffer had just made perfectly clear, in charge of this dubious mission.

Alright, Seven. Time to play your game.

“Susie?” Mike asked as he came up next to El. “Who’s Susie? Finish the fight? What fight? Like tonight? With them? What’s going on!?” The questions sputtered out of him uncontrollably.

El’s eyes remained trained on Seven, whose condition seemed to be deteriorating by the minute.

‘You can’t save everyone...’

She blinked as Susie’s words echoed in her brain.

El turned to Mike and placed a hand on his shoulder. "I'll explain later," she said before turning back to Seven. "What do we do?"

The soldiers had just about reached the entrance and didn't seem to be slowing down. Seven grimaced as he slowly raised himself out of the chair. "That hurt, by the way," he said as he walked passed El and a very agitated Mike. "But I suppose I deserved it."

"Where do you think you're going!?" Mike yelled at him as El's grip on his shoulder intensified.

"Not far, trust me," Seven replied as he found himself in front of the other three people in the room. "Dustin. Lucas. Max," he said, nodding to each one individually. "As you heard, my name is Steven, also known as Seven. I'd love to chit-chat longer but you all have a lot to do."

"We have a lot to do?" Lucas asked, still gripping his weapon.

"Yes, *you*," Seven replied curtly. He walked over to a table and grabbed the device sitting on top of it. That action caused a visible twitch from the others. "Calm down, it's not for you. It's for them," he said, gesturing outside. "This place is a little too bright, don't you think?"

With the press of a button, half of the lights in the room went out. More specifically, half the lights went out on the entire floor, as well as all of the lights on the first two floors.

"Shit!" Dustin yelled, as he was caught off guard by the sudden lighting change.

"Can someone please explain to me why we're letting him do things?" Max asked as she took a step towards Seven, switchblade still in hand.

Mike must have been wondering the same, except he didn't verbalize his opinion. Instead, he decided to use physical force for the second time that night. Before El knew what was happening, Mike escaped her grasp and rushed Seven for a second time.

This attack proved far more successful. With a sickening thud,

Seven's body was knocked against the glass window. "Oww! Oh, for Christ's sake, Mikey! We don't have time to horse around," Seven said as he felt his chest being crushed.

"C'mon Mike, teach Bizarro Dustin a lesson!" Dustin said, cheering his friend on.

"Bizarro...?" Seven began before being abruptly cut off.

"Shut up!" Mike screamed as he raised his hand in fist and swung. Seven winced in anticipation but the blow never landed. Mike's fist remained hovering in air, much to their surprise.

"Mike! Stop it," El said as she grasped his fist within her hand and unfroze his arm. "The bad men are here. We need to fight *them*, not *him*."

"The lights are off on the first two floors now," Seven said while still pressed up against the glass. "That should slow them down and give us time to make our moves."

"Oh, so it's all of us now?" Lucas replied. "I thought you just said they're our problem."

"Can we not..." But Seven cut himself off this time. He assumed that the soldiers were already inside and cursed himself for allowing this encounter to drag on for so long. "Look, there's no time. I'm not the enemy right now, okay? Shit happened between us, let's deal with that later."

Mike continued to stare at Seven with hatred in his eyes but removed his arm from the subject's chest.

"Alright then," Seven said, trying to catch his breath. He knew that his ailing body couldn't take much more abuse. "We need to neutralize that strike team. Their mission is to capture Eleven at all costs. That includes killing me and any or all of you."

"I'm never going back," El said angrily while shaking her head. "Won't let them."

"We won't let them either!" Mike said, encircling his fingers within

hers. "We'll never let them hurt you again." He turned back to Seven and gritted his teeth. "Alright, fine. So, what's your amazing plan?"

Seven's eyes began to sparkle again just a little as he replied. "Remember our little talk about chess, Mike? We'll be playing a fun game of chess tonight. White moved first, so now it's our turn."

He pushed himself off of the wall and walked over to the nearby table. He reached into a box sitting on top of it and pulled out a lighter and a handgun. "Who wants to play?"

Well, getting inside won't be an issue, Colonel Maddox thought as he surveyed the shattered glass of the front doors.

It was deathly quiet. The team was assembled just outside the entrance, awaiting further instruction. The lobby appeared to be mostly empty except for a small pile of winter clothing in the middle of the floor.

"Matthews, Enberg, Jefferson, Barrow, take the left. Mathews on point," Maddox instructed. "O'Conner, Anderson, Peterson with me. Harris, you're with the doc. Hold position and wait for my signal."

Without another word, the two groups entered into lobby with guns drawn. Maddox made his way over to the pile of clothing as he signaled his men to continue on to the right. He nudged at the pile with his boot. The hat was large but the jacket and gloves were clearly meant for a child.

It has to be her. She's actually here...

He turned left and received the 'all clear' signal before receiving the same from the right. Turning back to the doorway he raised his hand just as the world was plunged into darkness.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, the Colonel repeated internally as heard multiple

voices all at once. "Be quiet!" He hissed from his position in the middle of the lobby. But one person continued to speak, much to his aggravation.

"Maddox!" Dr. Pfeiffer said far too loudly. "What are we waiting for!? He knows we're here!"

Of course he does, you idiot. Because of you! The Colonel silently replied. His grip on the rifle in his hands tightened as he briefly considered a different target. A target still illuminated by the outside light.

"Equip night vision," Maddox ordered as he lowered his own pair over his eyes. The interior of the building was now bathed in a hazy green aura. "Footprints led off to the right. Matthews, regroup on me," he continued as he finally made it over to his squad. "Harris, move up."

The exterior lights went out just as all three groups converged. Since Dr. Pfeiffer had scoffed at the idea of equipping similar military gear, he was effectively blind. "How is he doing that? He asked, holding on to his companion, Harris, in front of him. "The control room was disassembled and sealed."

The Colonel ignored him. He scanned the hallway. Every door was closed. There was an intersection about halfway down. He signaled Mathews to take his squad down the left side of the wall as he would take the right. They moved in silence. Surprisingly, even Dr. Pfeiffer was keeping his mouth shut during the trip.

Upon reaching the intersection, Maddox silently instructed everyone to hold position. He contemplated their next move.

Open door straight ahead. Stairway to the left, open door...

He didn't want to split up the team again, but he knew the building was expansive and there was a lot of ground to cover.

"Matthews, take your squad up the stairwell. Sweep, the second floor," Maddox instructed. "I'll proceed down the corridor, take the back stairs to the third. Signal when clear or if targets are located. Do

not engage unless I give the order. Harris, you and the doctor are with us. Five-meter separation. Move out.”

As the groups diverged, the Colonel couldn't help but think that they were doing exactly as Seven intended. Their element of surprise had been thwarted by the weather and this new development was particularly problematic.

They're just kids, he thought, trying to reassure himself. *Powers or not, they're still just kids.*

A few minutes passed before the earpieces in the soldiers' ears crackled with the voice of Matthews. “Sir, second floor doorway is locked. Permission to breach?”

“Negative,” Colonel Maddox replied. *Can't risk the noise.* “Hold position, we'll try from the other side.”

Matthews responded in an instant. “Roger that. And sir, it smells like there's been a chemical spill. Stairs are slick wit... SHIT! GET BACK, GET BAAHHHH...!”

Maddox pulled out his earpiece as he raced back up the hall. But removing the device didn't silence the sound of the blood-curdling screams. That sound echoed throughout the entire first floor. He ran passed a bewildered Dr. Pfeiffer who had been suddenly abandoned by his escort.

“Maddox! Maddox!” Dr. Pfeiffer yelled into the blackness. “What's happening?”

The Colonel rounded the corner and stopped short as his eyes reflexively closed shut. He quickly whipped off the night vision headset and stared at the flames pouring out of the stairwell where Matthews and his squad had recently ascended. Harris had beaten him there and was calling out to his compatriots in vain.

Maddox didn't bother saying anything. There was nothing that could be done. The heat of the inferno was too intense and kept him and the other soldiers, all of whom had finally arrived at the scene, at bay. The screams from the stairwell quickly dissipated and all that

remained was the roar of the fire

The Colonel's gaze travelled upward and he observed the darkened emergency light, the silent alarm and the dry sprinkler head on the ceiling above him.

He disengaged the emergency systems. This was a tr...

"Your move, Colonel Maddox."

"This isn't like chess!" Mike yelled at Seven as he stared at the gun. He suddenly wished he was still clutching the wrench. "It's not just a game!"

"Yes, it is Mike," Seven replied as he placed the gun on the table and flicked the lighter on. "Everything is just all one big game. The Germans invaded other countries, the world responded in kind. The Russians do this, the United States does that. Our government tries to kill us... Well, we fight back."

The others, sans El, had taken a step back at the sight of the gun. They still didn't trust Seven in the slightest.

"Here's what's going to happen," Seven continued as he picked up the wired controller from the floor and turned it over a few times. It appeared undamaged. "First, I'm going to shut off the exterior lights like I was supposed to do earlier..." With the press of a button, the outside world disappeared from view.

"Secondly, one of you is going to take this lighter and set the world on fire. Well, maybe not the world. Just a bunch of soldiers." Seven flicked the lighter again, closing the lid and extinguishing the flame.

"I can do that," Max replied, causing the others to stare at her in shock. Even Eleven seemed taken aback.

“Wait, what!?” Lucas snapped. “You can’t kill people!”

“I’m pretty sure they’re here to do that to us,” Max replied as she walked up to Seven and snatched the lighter from his hand. “So how exactly I am supposed to fight them with a lighter?”

“I’m glad you asked,” Seven said as he smiled at her. “Did you guys notice a particular smell in that stairwell when you came up?”

“Yea, we did,” Lucas said as he recalled the terrible odor. “You... you poured something on the stairs, didn’t you? Something flammable right?”

“Very good!” Seven replied. “And since that is only one of two stairwells in the building, at least some of the team will use it. But we’ll be waiting for them.” He paused for a second while he observed the kids standing before him. “I believe it was Admiral Ackbar who said, ‘IT’S A TRAP!’”

“You’ve seen ‘Star Wars’!?” Mike and Dustin exclaimed in unison, momentarily forgetting everything else that was going on in the world.

“Oh my God, even he’s a nerd,” Max stated flatly as Lucas also seemed shocked by the movie reference. El didn’t understand what they were talking about, but she did understand what they had to do.

What I have to do, she said to herself.

El eyed Max who was standing off to the side and letting the boys blabber on. She didn’t know the redhead very well, but it was clear that the others trusted her. And El believed the girl when she said she’d kill the bad men. That was what bothered her the most.

While Mike and the others were distracted by *Star Wars* references, El slowly walked back towards the open door. Although she did her best to be stealthy, her movements didn’t go unnoticed by everyone.

Just as El was about to step outside, Seven called out to her. “Don’t forget the lighter, Eleven!”

The Party spun around on the spot. El spied the metallic device - *lighter* - in Max's right hand.

"El!" Mike's voice was filled with panic. "Wha... what are you doing!?"

For a moment, everything was silent and still. El's eyes locked with Mike's. His begged hers to stay. Hers apologized for leaving.

"Stay here. I'll kill the bad men," El said as the lighter flew out of Max's hand and landed safely in hers. Another step backwards and she was in the hall.

"NOOO!" Mike screamed while rushing forward. But before he could reach the exit, the heavy door slammed shut. He pulled the handle to no avail. El was holding it firmly shut with her mind.

"Son of a bitch!"

"El, stop!"

"Why did she do that!?"

Seven smiled widely as the others congregated at the door, yelling and banging on it.

You were right about her, he thought.

Seven walked back over to the chair against the wall and slumped into it. "Guys, calm down."

"Calm down!?" Mike felt his body fill with rage once again. "El just left by herself and she locked us in here!"

"Yes, Mike. She did," Seven replied as he wiped his upper lip with his sleeve. It would be covered in fresh blood again momentarily. "Eleven decided to play the game. Now if you'll all excuse me for a few minutes, I need to make sure that our Queen knows *how* to move."

Mike began walking in his direction as Seven sighed. "Mike, don't worry. You know she can handle herself. And I'll keep an eye on her.

I promise.”

Before Mike, or anyone else, could reply, Steven’s eyes closed and his body seemed to go limp.

“Did he just...?” Lucas began as he spun his head around the room. The others looked around as well but no new apparition had appeared.

“Well, shit. So now what do we do, Mike?” Dustin asked.

Mike stopped in front of the Subject Seven and looked down at him. A trickle of blood began to exit the boy’s nose. Mike was reminded of how El had looked when he had first met her. Small, frail and scared. Since then, El had changed dramatically. It didn’t look as though Seven had improved much at all since his imprisonment.

“Five minutes,” Mike finally replied. “We’ll give them five minutes and then we’re busting down that door.”

He then leaned down and whispered directly in Seven’s face. “And if anything happens to El, I’ll kill you myself.”

El felt her body tense up as she walked down the bloody corridor once again. She tried to stare straight ahead and ignore the red writing surrounding her. She was glad that the hallway was darker now. That had at least made the frightful images and words less noticeable.

As she approached the stairwell, the hairs on her arms and the back of her neck suddenly went rigid.

“I thought you could use some company,” Seven said as he appeared next to her. “And besides, I don’t think you know how to use that thing in your hand.”

El had expected to see the polished and handsome version of the boy when she turned her head, but she was mistaken. Seven had not altered his form in the least. But in a strange way, El felt that this appearance was far more comfortable to interact with.

More real.

“The... lighter?” El asked, looking down at the object. “No, I don’t know...”

“Three could control fire all by herself,” Seven interrupted. “I wish you could have seen it. She was incredible. Imagine what she could have done if...” He stopped suddenly and shook his head.

El studied the boy. Seven had the power to change his appearance, but he couldn’t disguise his feelings. The sadness on his face was and in his tired eyes was plain to see. She reached out a hand and watched as it passed straight through his with ease.

“Flip the top of the lighter up,” Seven quietly instructed as they reached the stairwell. “There’s a little wheel underneath that you need to flick with your thumb while pressing down on that button under it to create a spark and ignite the fuel.” He made the motion with his fingers as he watched Eleven attempt the maneuver.

“Like this?” El asked, as her tiny fingers tried to mimic Seven’s actions. After only a couple attempts, a flame erupted from the tiny metal container.

“Perfect,” Seven replied as he peered into the stairwell. “Just in time. I can hear them moving down there. C’mon.”

El followed him onto the landing. That terrible odor she had smelled earlier was evident once again.

“There’s a tiny piece of metal wedged in near the top,” Seven continued. “Turn it so that the button stays held down. Then all you have to do is drop the lighter over the railing. The floor is covered in chemicals that will catch fire and burn those bastards.”

Bastards? El didn’t recognize the word.

“The people down there. All bad men?” El asked. “They would take me back?”

El had killed people in the past, but she had hoped that it would never again be necessary. It was a terrible feeling that stayed inside of her always. That is why she didn’t want Max, that girl she barely knew and had even hated once, to suffer the same guilt

Seven turned and stared into Eleven’s eyes once more. The stairwell was dark but he could still make out their brownness by the light of the fire in her grasp.

“If they find me and your friends here, they’ll kill us,” he said quietly but firmly. “And then they’ll take you away. Forever this time. You will be drugged and tortured and you will never again see the outside of a prison cell. I can promise you that.”

El nodded as she stepped forward, lighter in hand. She held it over the railing while continuing to stare at the flickering flame. It was oddly mesmerizing.

“It’s your decision, Eleven,” Seven said. “There’s still time to run. Or, will you help to finish the fight?”

Suddenly, the light disappeared from Eleven’s face. It began traveling downward through the darkness, faster and faster by the second. The light exposed the faces of several confused men in military fatigues before clattering against the concrete floor.

And then the light returned to Eleven’s face as the once tiny flame exploded with an uncontrollable fury. She could see the men flailing. She could hear their screams. She could feel the intense heat.

“Eleven! Get out!” Seven yelled as the inferno intensified.

Seven’s screams shook El from her trance and she quickly backed out of the stairwell. With a flick of her head the door slammed shut, sealing the conflagration away.

Side by side, Eleven and Seven stared at the closed door. A few wisps of smoke began escaping through the seams.

“Queen takes Pawns,” Seven said with a chuckle. “Well done, Eleven. Now let’s go find us a Bishop!”

Notes for the Chapter:

Is it just me or are these chapters getting longer and longer? No, it's not. They totally are. This one is (wait for it) OVER 9000! words. Clearly, earlier chapters should have been combined or I needed to break this thing up into longer chapters. Eh, it's a learning experience.

So, everyone is in the lab and the death count has begun. I hope everyone enjoys this first foray into battle. The next chapter will, obviously, contain far more combat and possibly death. Let's hope the Party is up to the task! Thank you reading and I hope to get the final chapters out quickly. July is another crazy busy month for me. I'll do my best but I want to make the last ones as awesome as possible. Thank you so much for reading!

13. Ashes to Ashes

Summary for the Chapter:

Blood began running from El's nose but she ignored it. As the ringing lessened in intensity, she could finally distinguish the myriad voices surrounding her. Mike's desperate plea, the soldier cursing in anger, Steven screaming to watch out.

Notes for the Chapter:

Wow, It's been a while. And I lied once again. This is not the final chapter. There will be one more. This is why one should outline a story before diving in!

If I begin, will I end?

If I fall, will I ascend?

If I break, will I mend?

If I don't, will you pretend?

The minutes ticked by slowly. Too slowly for his liking. His feet stayed glued to the floor directly in front of the chair in the corner of the room. His eyes stayed focused on the occupant.

"Dude, would you just sit down or something?"

"Yeah, you're kinda freaking us out."

He didn't answer his friends. His friends were in the room. They were safe. But she wasn't in the room. And he didn't know if she was safe. And that was the problem.

Seven's limp body continued to remain motionless under the watchful eyes of Michael Wheeler. Every now and then, he shot a lightning-quick glance at the watch on his wrist. Once the fifth minute ticked by and there was still no sign of El or Seven, Mike's silent vigil ended.

Spinning on his feet, Mike made a beeline for the table in the middle of the room.

"Finally," Dustin mumbled. "Mike, it's been five minutes. What are we gonna do?"

Mike heard the question but didn't reply. Instead, he grabbed the handgun off the table and turned back towards the corner in one fluid motion.

"Holy shit!" Max screamed while jumping up from the chair she was sitting in.

"Mike, put the gun down!" Lucas yelled while pulling Max back towards him.

"Are you insane?" Dustin asked as he quickly ducked down behind some stacked boxes.

Ignoring the protests from his friends, Mike returned to the corner of the room. The cold metal of the gun sent shivers up and down his arm. It was the first time he had ever held one.

"This," Mike said at last. "This is what we're going to do. What *I'm* going to do," he corrected himself before raising the gun and pointing it straight at Seven's limp head.

The weight of the thing surprised Mike. He tried to hold it steady but his hand was shaking. When they had arrived at the lab, he had been armed with a common household tool. Now, here he was with a weapon of death.

'Everything is just all one big game...'

Seven's words echoed in Mike's head. They infuriated him.

This is all because of him, he thought.

“Mike! Listen to... Wait, did you guys just hear that!?” Max said from behind Lucas. But the others didn’t appear to be paying attention to anyone besides Mike.

The incident at the Snow Ball, El’s terrifying encounter, Will getting tricked and hurt, the car accident, the hospital room threat, the return of the bad men.

Fine. If it’s all just a game then it’s my turn to play, Mike concluded.

Mike turned his head towards his friends, all of whom were now mostly hidden behind piles of boxes and furniture, before speaking again.

“If they’re not back here in ten sec... no, *seven* seconds, then I’m...” He tried to steady both his voice and his hand. “I’m going to shoot him!”

“Seven seconds!?” Lucas shouted. “Mike, stop it. You’re acting crazy!”

“You think El would want you to do that?” Dustin added from behind his hiding spot.

“Seven.” Mike began counting.

“Six.” He grasped the gun with his other hand as well.

“Mike! I’m serious, cut it out!”

“Five.” The gun felt much steadier now.

“Do something!”

“What do you want me to do? He’s got the gun!”

“Four.” He concentrated on his target.

“Three.” His heart was pounding.

“FUCK!”

“Two.” He took a deep breath.

“Wait, I hear something outside!”

“One.” He closed his eyes.

And then Mike heard another voice. A voice that did not belong to one of his friends.

“Do it, Mike. Pull the fucking trigger.”

Colonel Maddox spun around on his heels upon hearing his name. A flash of shock upon his face was immediately replaced by pure fury. It took tremendous restraint for him not to raise his weapon and unleash a torrent of bullets. But he knew it would be pointless. Unfortunately, his men did not.

The deafening sound of bullets exploding through gun barrels and impacting and ricocheting off of the walls inundated the hallway. The Colonel dropped to the ground as they whizzed by far too close to his body.

“CEASE FIRE! CEASE FIRE!” He screamed. After what seemed like an eternity, the barrage concluded and a relative silence returned. Although the shrill ringing in everyone’s ears would linger much longer.

“Well that was fun,” Steven said. He was leaning in front of the now bullet-ridden wall, arms crossed against his chest and a wide grin on his face growing ever larger by the second. “Everyone feeling better now?”

Colonel Maddox leapt to his feet and approached the ethereal boy. He was beyond livid.

“Sir, what’s goi...?” One of the soldiers began before being abruptly

cut off.

“It’s just a fucking projection!” Maddox yelled as he stuck his rifle straight through Steven’s torso. “See?” He shouted again as he turned back towards his dumbfounded men. “Nothing’s there. Next time, wait for my fucking orders before engaging targets!”

“Target?” Steven asked, feigning offense. “Is that all I am to you, Colonel? A target? Gee whiz, I thought we were pals...”

“Shut the fuck up you worthless piece of shit!” Maddox replied, his focus turned back toward the insolent test subject. “When I find you...”

“Yeah, about that,” Steven interrupted. He wasn’t about to get roped into another long conversation tonight. “I just have a quick announcement.” He turned his attention to the men standing behind the Colonel, guns still raised and pointed at him.

“You see what happened to your buddies over there?” Steven asked while gesturing towards the fire still pouring out from the stairwell. “That was just a lighter and some chemicals. Eleven and I didn’t even need to use our powers for that one. Imagine what we can do to you on our own.”

“Listen, kid...” Maddox began through gritted teeth.

“No, you listen to me, soldier boy,” Steven continued. “The rest of you too. “You’re all just doing your jobs. You’re in the military. I get it. We don’t want to kill you, but we will if you come after us. All we want is...” Steven paused as he observed a new individual joining the gathering.

“Maddox! What is happe...?” A very flustered and out of breath Dr. Pfeiffer had just rounded the corner. He stopped speaking the second his eyes processed the sight before him.

“Y-you. It’s you!” the doctor hissed as he pointed a finger at his former experiment. “Shoot him! Shoot him now!” He yelled.

“NO!” Maddox shouted while outstretching his arms. “Hold your fucking fire! He’s not there you idio...” Somehow, he was able to stop

himself from finishing the insult. "You should know better than anyone that he's not really here!"

"Him," Steven concluded. "All we want is the good doctor. Give him to us, and the rest of you may go home unharmed."

"What? What was that?" Dr. Pfeiffer closed the distance between himself and the Colonel and stared up at him. "What's going on here, Maddox!? Answer me!"

The Colonel ignored the pestering old man. His eyes were locked with Seven's. Four men were already dead and he knew there would only be more bloodshed to come. He thought about what he had told himself earlier.

'They're just kids.'

That assessment seemed less reassuring at present. For a moment, the Colonel quietly considered Seven's offer. Unfortunately, anger and hate are powerful emotions that cloud the minds of even the most sensible people.

"Maddox!" The doctor yelled once again, breaking the brief silence.

The Colonel continued to hold his stare. "Subject Seven has just confirmed that Subject Eleven is still on the premises. We'll continue with the mission to locate and secure Eleven. And then, as it now seems necessary, we will eliminate Seven."

Steven's eyes flashed a blinding shade of blue reserved for the times when he was most infuriated. "Is that right? Fine. So be it," he hissed. "Enjoy your final moments alive."

And with that, the illusion of the boy vanished. The men were left staring at the damaged wall he had been leaning against. The crackle of a dying fire was the only enduring sound.

Mike's eyes shot open. His finger had been trembling over the trigger and he was just about to squeeze when he heard the sound of Steven's voice.

"Do it, Mike. Pull the fucking trigger."

Steven's head was still tilted at an angle, but his eyes were open, albeit barely. The lower part of his face was coated in fresh blood and his breathing appeared labored.

"C'mon, do it," Steven continued. "I hurt you. I hurt your friends. I hurt the girl you love..." at that, he began coughing and brought his hand up to his mouth to wipe away some of the blood.

"You hate me, Mike. Strike me down with all your hatred..." he finished, in a barely audible voice. His eyelids fluttered.

Mike was still holding the gun in both hands. The barrel of the weapon was still pointed at Steven's head. But those words caused Mike's resolve to falter.

'Strike me down with all your hatred.' Mike couldn't help but playback the scene from "Star Wars: Return of the Jedi" when Emperor Palpatine was goading Luke Skywalker to give into his hate and attack him. Luke had resisted the Emperor's earlier taunts, but had finally succumbed.

Do it, something in back of Mike's mind instructed.

His hands were shaking harder than before. Once again, Mike was struck by Steven's gaunt appearance. The boy was looking worse by the minute. There was barely any blue visible in those half-closed eyes. The vitriol in Mike was still present, but there was also pity and even sadness.

No. I won't. I won't do it, he replied.

Mike had made his decision. He would not give in to his anger. As he began to lower the gun, the door which had been sealed tightly by El flew open. Mike whipped around instinctively and watched as the girl he did indeed love, walked in.

Eleven's eyes went wide as she surveyed the room. Lucas was crouched down against the wall with Max, who was clutching the back of his jacket. Dustin had his hands over his ears and was kneeling on the floor behind a stack of boxes. And then there was Mike.

The expression on Mike's face was a combination of shock, worry and fear. But El didn't focus on his face for more than a second. Her gaze immediately traveled downward and landed on the gun in his hands.

"E... EL! I.... uhh," Mike stumbled over his words as he followed her gaze down to the gun still in his grasp. Before he could utter another word, the weapon flew out of his hands, landing with a loud clang against the floor in the far corner.

"Oh shit! EL, be careful with that thing!" Lucas screamed as he covered his head with his arms.

El didn't even glance at Lucas as she began marching over towards Mike, who was looking positively terrified. She had used her powers against him. That hadn't happened since back when they were at his school battling the Demogorgon.

"El, wait! It's... it's not what it looks like..." Mike began as he took a step backwards. "I wasn't going to... I mean..."

Steven cocked his head to watch the spectacle. He observed the fear on Mike's face and the annoyance on Eleven's. As much as he enjoyed seeing the young boy squirm, he was impressed by Mike's decision not to pull the trigger.

It took just one word from him to prevent the impending confrontation.

"Jane."

El froze in place just as she reached Mike. They both turned and looked down at Steven who was smiling back up at them.

"It's alright, Jane. Mike didn't do anything bad, don't worry," Steven said in a steady voice.

Relief washed over Mike's face as El studied both boys. She didn't believe that for a second.

"What? He was going to shoot yo... oh, whoops." Dustin exclaimed before the glares from Mike and Steven stymied his outburst.

Mike swallowed hard and slowly turned back to El. Her eyes weren't filled with hate. They were filled with something far worse: Disappointment.

"El, I'm... I'm sorry. You just left and locked us in here and then he..." Mike gestured at Steven with his now empty hands as he spoke "Uhh...left? And I didn't know if you were safe... and..."

"Mike," El began but she knew where this was going.

"And I.... I mean, we... we waited but then you didn't come back and I was worried and scared... and angry I guess..."

"Mike..."

"And yeah I... uhh... I took the gun and umm... iwasntreallygonnashoothim..." Mike's rambling had devolved into an almost indecipherable mumbling. His face was tomato red and he was suddenly intently focused on his jacket's zipper. He kept pulling it on while wishing he could just turn invisible.

Steven couldn't help but chuckle. "He's a good guy, Jane. I can see why you love him so much."

It was El's turn to blush if only a little. "Mike," she said again. "Look at me."

Slowly, Mike raised his head and stared at her with sad, puppy-dog eyes. "I'm sorry, El. And uhh... I'm sorry Seve... Steven."

El closed the gap between herself and Mike and embraced him in a tight hug. "Don't be stupid again, okay?"

"You know what, I take it back," Steven said. "This right here. This moment. This is now the cutest thing I've ever seen."

“Uhh, guys?” Lucas asked as he, Max and Dustin left their hiding places and approached the trio. “Do you want to tell us what’s going on?”

“Yeah, so did the plan work?” Dustin added. “Did you kill them all?”

El grimaced as she heard that awful word and thought about what she had just done. More people had indeed just died as a result of her actions.

Steven noticed her discomfort and spoke first. “One of their teams was eliminated, yes. I did my best to convince the others to leave, but they ignored my advice. Unfortunately, that means there are four more pieces to dispose of before we can take out the bishop.”

“The *bishop*?” Max asked, making her way out from behind Lucas. “Like a priest? Why is...”

“No, no.” Mike interrupted. “He means chess. A bishop is one of the pieces on a chessboard. It’s like an analogy he’s using for the bad men.” He once again reflected on the semi-conscious discussion he had with Steven in the hospital room.

“Oookay. So, who’s this bishop guy?” Dustin asked. Lucas appeared just as confused as he was.

Steven’s expression darkened as he spoke. “His name is Dr. Eric Pfeiffer. He was, and still is, one of the lead scientists at the Department of Energy. I’m sure you all still remember a certain Dr. Brenner, correct?”

An audible gasp escaped El’s mouth as the image of that cruel man filled her mind. Her hands started to shake but they were instantly met with the embrace of Mike’s. Her heart skipped a beat as she looked at his face. He was staring right back at her.

“Yeah, that asshole who kept El locked up and came after us!” Lucas said. “Oh, and uhh... I guess same with you, right? Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” Steven replied. He focused directly on El before continuing. “If Dr. Brenner is your *Papa*, then Dr. Pfeiffer is your Grandfather. This entire project was his idea. He was always the one

in charge. If we kill him, we may be able to prevent others from suffering like we did.”

“Promise me you’ll do whatever it takes to end our suffering...”

Susie’s powerful words flooded back into El’s ears and any trace of fear vanished. It was replaced by pure rage.

“Where is he?” El asked through gritted teeth. She felt the familiar tingling of her powers rising up within her.

“He’s here, Jane,” Steven replied instantly. “I saw him. He’s here and we’re going to make him pay for what he did to us.”

Dustin suddenly began briskly walking away from the group, catching the others off guard. He strode to the far corner of the room and retrieved the pistol from the floor.

“Then I guess we’re going to need this gun after all!” He stated while examining the weapon. “Son of a bitch, this thing is heavy.”

“Dustin!” Max screeched at him as she ducked behind Lucas once again.

“Shit! Haven’t we had enough of that thing!?” Lucas added angrily.

“Guys, guys, it’s fine. He can’t hurt anyone with it,” Steven said as his lips curved back into a smile.

“Hey!” Dustin fired back, feeling a bit insulted. “What’s that supposed to mean? It’s not like Mike’s ever fired a gun before. I could do it!”

“No, it’s not that,” Steven said as he began to chuckle. “The gun isn’t... It’s not...” He was laughing hard now, much to everyone’s confusion. “It’s not loaded!” Steven finally got out as he clutched his chest and continued to laugh.

Mike dropped EL’s hands. He gaped at Steven before completely losing it. “ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME!?”

Slowly and silently through the darkness. Down the long hallway. Into the stairwell. Up the stairs. Hearts beating rapidly. Eyes constantly scanning. Fingers on the triggers.

There was no trap. Nothing was amiss. The Third-Floor door was unlocked. It opened without a sound, just like the door on the Second.

Nothing to the right. The hallway ended just a few meters away from the door. Nothing to the left. There was no sign of movement down the long corridor. It was silent. Completely silent.

Carefully, cautiously. Just a few steps at a time. There were rooms on either side of the hallway. Each one had to be cleared. This was tedious and methodical work. Searching an entire building was a job meant for a far larger team. There had been others up until very recently. But they were gone now. No time to think about that.

Some of the rooms were completely bare. Others were crowded with furniture and discarded scientific instruments. All of them had damaged ceiling tiles with exposed wires hanging down. None of them contained the target.

The end of the hallway finally came into view, bathed in the hazy green hue of their night vision goggles. Another empty floor. Still more to go. But another moment still alive.

A hesitant hand made contact with the handle on the stairwell door. It didn't budge. Upon further inspection, the door appeared to have been welded shut. Even if someone had been able to climb the stairs, there would have been no escape from the flames within.

No words were exchanged. Simple hand gestures conveyed the status. They indicated where to head next. Even though the floor had already been cleared, a palpable fear was present. Their pace quickened.

Back down the long hallway. Back towards the stairwell. Back

towards the working door.

A quick twist of the handle followed by a quick pull and the door should have opened. But it didn't budge. Another twist, another pull. A third time. A fourth. A fifth. The result was the same.

Some believe that the true definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again, but expecting different results. The soldiers standing in front of that door, desperately trying to open it again and again may have been acting in an insane way, but they were far from crazy.

These men had every reason to believe that the door they had previously opened, the door they had opened with such ease, the same door they were standing in front of once again, would open without difficulty. But here they were. And there it was. And the completely unexpected was happening.

Another twist, another pull. No, they were not insane. They were scared. And after an audible clicking sound, they were also temporarily blinded.

The dark can be terrifying. The inability to see what's around you is often unnerving. But sometimes the light is worse. Whereas you may be frightened of the unknown in the darkness, you are positively terrified when you see what was hiding within it.

But gone was the darkness. Gone was the tinted green hall. Gone was the silence. Gone was the unknown.

It's amazing how fast a body can move when it really wants to. Adrenaline overrides normal precautions. In times of imminent peril, the brain makes one of two decisions: Fight or Flight.

Two men. Two decisions. In the end, it didn't matter which one they made. The result would have been the same regardless. Maybe they realized that. Maybe they realized that it was an impossible choice. And maybe they knew that it would have been insane to think differently.

At first, they were screaming. And then they were shooting. And then

they were flying. And then they were crashing. And then were dying. And then they did nothing.

Silence had returned. It was a deathly silence. But then a single pair of footsteps reverberated throughout the hallway. There was slow and steady breathing. There was a trickle of blood. There was a nod.

At 12:03 am on December 18, 1984, two men walked into the Third-Floor hallway of the Hawkins National Laboratory in Hawkins, Indiana. At 12:24 am, a single girl walked out.

He was frozen in place. His heart felt as though it was about to burst from his chest. The knuckles on his right hand were turning white from the death grip he had around the transceiver. A full minute passed by before he could even blink.

“Tell. Everyone. Need. Help. Now.”

Mike’s final words were received loud and clear. His friends had reached their destination. They had reason to believe El was there. They needed help.

Will Byers was standing alone in the middle of his room, far away from his friends. He was wearing pajamas. His ankle was injured and throbbing. He felt small and worthless.

Will’s eyes closed and he was back in the Upside Down. Alone. Scared. Cold. Desperate. He had barely survived the ordeal. And then less than a year later the darkness returned. Hunted. Tortured. Possessed.

Throughout all of his suffering, there was always one constant: His family and friends did everything in their power to help him. To free him. To save him.

Will Byers was not going to let his friends down this night or any

other night. If they needed everyone's help, they were going to get everyone's help.

His eyes opened wide and he spun around and began marching towards his door with determination. That was until his ankle gave out, he failed to steady himself, he missed the edge of the bed and he fell to the floor with a loud thud and an audible gasp.

Fortunately, embarrassment and pain were not the only results of his clumsy fall. The noise had awoken his brother who, only moments later, came bursting into the room with a look of concern on his tired face.

"Will!" Jonathan exclaimed as he dropped to the floor and reached for his younger brother. "Are you okay, buddy? What happened?"

"Errggh, I fell," Will moaned as he let himself be lifted up by Jonathan. "It was my ankle. I-I tried to walk on it and it's still really sore and uhh... yea..." He trailed off as Jonathan guided him onto the bed.

Jonathan had noticed the walkie in Will's hand immediately. It was clear that Will had fallen down with it in his hand and he still hadn't let go of it.

"Will, what are you doing with that thing? Who are you talking to?" Jonathan asked. His brother wasn't hard to read. Something serious was going on.

Will took a deep breath and looked at his brother straight in the eyes. "Mike, Dustin, Lucas and Max went to the lab tonight to try to find the person or thing or... whatever it is that's been messing with us. They think El is there too and Mike told me they need help so I was on my way to tell you and Mom and that's when I fell. I can't help my friends because of my stupid ankle but I need you guys to get the Chief and go help them before someone else gets hurt too!"

Jonathan was taken aback by Will's speech. His brother's voice was a bit unsteady but serious and pleading. "They... they went to the lab by themselves?" Jonathan finally asked. "At night? And you didn't think to tell anyone? To tell me!?"

He felt a strange combination of anger, fear and dread. His brother's friends had traveled alone at night to the one place they were never supposed to set foot near again. The fact that El was apparently back at the facility was even more confusing and troubling.

"I-I know, I'm sorry," Will said quietly uttered as he fidgeted on the bed. "Mike, well all of us, were worried that if we told everyone what was going on, Hopper would take El away for good. And after everything that happened last month..."

"Will, you can't keep secrets like this from us," Jonathan interrupted. "I thought we were all a team. You and your friends, me, Mom, the Chief, Nancy and uhh... Steve."

"We are a team!" Will stated emphatically. "It's... it's just that..."

"Mom is going to completely flip out you know," Jonathan said through a heavy sigh and cutting Will off. "And the Chief... Jesus Christ." He shook his head back and forth, dreading the conversations to come.

"I know," Will replied in a hushed voice. "But El and them need our help. All of our help. We can't let them down!"

Jonathan took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "Of course we're going to help, Will. Now, c'mon, I'm not going to tell Mom all of this on my own."

"Thanks, Jonathan," Will said with a tiny smile. He gazed at the clock sitting on his nightstand. It was 11:34 pm.

Gingerly, Will got up on his feet. He held onto his brothers arm as they began walking out of the room. The hallway was still predominantly dark, but that didn't impede their progress. The short trip ended in front of their Mother's door. It was closed shut. Neither of them made a move to open it.

Peace and quiet were allowed to linger in the Byer's household for a moment longer.

El wiped the blood from her nose with her right shirt sleeve as she walked up the hall. There was an open door to her left which she quickly walked through. She navigated her way around several stacks of furniture until she reached the back corner. From the correct angle, several overturned cabinets with open drawers appeared as a passable set of stairs.

El stopped in front in front of the cabinets and peered up at the ceiling. A tile was missing now and she could see straight through to the next floor. She wondered how long it had taken Steven to carve this path.

"Two days," a voice from behind her said. "It took me two days to cut through the floor if that's what you're wondering."

The voice didn't startle her. She was growing used to Steven's sporadic appearances and disappearances. El nodded her head to convey that he was correct in his assumption.

"It's quite convenient if I do say so myself," Steven said as he approached her side. "And this isn't the only one."

El was about to reply but she became instantly distracted by the face looking down at her from above. She smiled as she gazed up at the figure's messy mop of black hair. Gone now was the heavy winter hat which had, up until now, obscured it from her view.

"El!" Mike whispered down at her. "Are you okay? What happened? How many were there? Are they dea... I mean, are they gone?"

"Now this is an interesting twist," Steven said with a smirk. "It's usually the princess up in the tower and the prince down below calling for her."

Even from this distance, Mike's blushing was clear. "Wha...? That's not... damn it... El, can you tell him to sto..."

"Hey Rapunzel," Steven interrupted. "Stop rambling and let down

your hair so your savior can climb back up.”

Mike continued to mumble as he let down a thick, knotted rope. El climbed the makeshift staircase and grabbed ahold of it.

“I’ll see you up there, Jane,” Steven said as he saluted the young girl. “You did well.”

El watched his figure disappear from view before turning her attention back to the rope. Although she was feeling a bit fatigued after the use of her power, she ascended with relative ease.

It was only a few feet, but Mike was genuinely impressed by El’s climbing prowess. He knew that his own upper-body strength was greatly lacking.

Mike had demanded that he accompany El during this second attack on the government forces. That, unsurprisingly, had led to an overly loud and aggravated exchange between all members of the Party. It was finally agreed that Mike would remain on the Fourth Floor, but stay in the room El descended from. Lucas and Max would keep watch from the hallway.

Feeling increasingly weaker by the minute, Steven informed them that he would physically remain in his ‘office’ but would continue to supervise El through his projected image. Dustin was tasked with keeping watch over his body.

“So, like, would you feel anything if I poked you?” Dustin had asked Steven as the others filed out.

Steven had stared at the boy with the toothy grin. “Don’t poke people. Especially not someone with superpowers.”

Mike reached for El’s hand as she neared top of the rope. She happily accepted it and was comforted by the contact of his warm skin against hers. With a gentle tug, El was back to the safety of Fourth Floor. She also found herself quickly back into the safety of Mike’s embrace.

“I hate this,” Mike said as he hugged her. “I hate them. I promise this is all going to be over soon.”

“Thank you, Mike,” El replied as she relaxed against him. She breathed in his familiar scent and sighed. She hoped that Mike’s promise would be, as they always were, fulfilled.

Steven stared at the duo from the doorway. He couldn’t remember the last time someone held him in a loving way in the real world. He literally could not. As much as Steven had tried over the years, he was unable to remember anything before his imprisonment and Two’s meddling with his brain. No happy memories. No pleasant touches. No warm hugs.

“Alright, break it up lovebirds,” Steven said to them quietly. He hoped the sadness in his voice wasn’t too obvious. “We need to...”

The explosion was deafening.

His knuckles were as white as the new fallen snow. The steering wheel was practically shuddering under the intensity of his grip. He stared outward with steady, unblinking eyes as he continued to travel at a speed well above anything that would be considered safe under the current conditions.

His passenger had decided to keep quiet for a bit following an epic rant the likes of which she had never heard before. However, after a hairpin turn that had almost caused the vehicle to careen off the road, the silence ended.

“JAMES HOPPER!” Joyce Byers screamed as she held onto the frame of the truck for dear life. “Slow down this instant before you get us both killed! We can’t help them if we don’t make it there alive!”

Chief Hopper seemed shocked by the sudden outburst and immediately raised his foot off the gas pedal. He stared at Joyce wide-eyed and saw how serious she was. “I... uhh, yes you’re right,” he mumbled as he returned to look at the road ahead. “Sorry.”

"I know you're worried, Hop. So am I," Joyce continued. "I can't believe they did this! After everything that's happened it's just..."

"Stupid," Hop interrupted. "It's so *fucking* stupid." When Joyce had arrived at the cabin and banged on the door, he had expected trouble. The only reason he hadn't shot straight through the door was because he recognized her voice.

It only took one word from Joyce to make him completely lose his cool. The second he heard 'El', he had bolted in the direction of her bedroom and splintered the door with a powerful kick. He wasn't afraid of scaring her. He knew she wasn't there. He just wanted to see the empty bed for himself.

Hopper shot a glance at the rearview mirror. The back seats were empty except for a rifle. He wasn't afraid of making the journey with just him and Joyce, but he silently wished that Jonathan or someone else was with them to provide additional support.

Joyce seemed to read his mind. "I couldn't leave Will at home by himself. Especially at night and with his ankle..." she trailed off with a sigh. "Are you sure you don't want to call..."

"Call? Call *who*?" Hopper interrupted but trying not to sound too gruff. "Their parents!? Can't tell anyone at the station. Too risky. And I understand. About Will I mean. Of course Jonathan had to stay with him. I almost wish that Harrington kid was around..."

"Steve?" Joyce asked with a raised eyebrow. She recalled the babysitting fiasco while Hop was with El at the lab and she was with Nancy and Jonathan tending to Will. Steve had failed to keep the kids at her house, but what they did had greatly contributed to the success defeat of the monsters.

"Yes, I like Steve," she concluded. "It would be good if..."

"Shit," Hopper interrupted once again as they rounded another turn. "Look, there's the lab." For the first time in what seemed like forever, he removed one of his hands from the steering wheel and pointed straight ahead. "Why the fuck are the lights on!? I'm going to wring those kids' necks!"

Joyce's heart began beating faster and faster as they continued to approach the facility. She prayed that her son's friends were still safe. Unfortunately, she couldn't help but fear the worst.

It only took another few minutes until the front gate was in view. Hopper immediately took note of the two military vehicles parked off to the side. He realized that the situation was now completely out of control.

"You have got to be fucking kidding me! Those are military trucks!" He yelled as he slammed his fist against the dashboard, causing Joyce to jump. "You know what that means? If they're here, they know El is too! Damn it!"

"Jesus, Hop. What do we do now?" Joyce asked as she scanned the area. She couldn't see any sign of activity in the immediate area.

"God damn it..." Hop mumbled while reaching back and grabbing the rifle. He handed it to Joyce as he reached back again and grabbed a shotgun from the floor. He was already equipped with his pistol, but he knew that was no longer sufficient.

"You said those are military trucks, right?" Joyce asked as she held the rifle. "So the people inside must be soldiers. Are you planning to fight them?"

Hopper didn't exactly know what he was planning, but he knew that Eleven, his now legal daughter, was inside that building along with four other Hawkins children. If he had to kill a couple of people to keep them safe, so be it.

"Let's go take a look. Then we can figure out the plan," he told Joyce as he opened the car door. A rush of cold air attacked his bare skin. He cursed himself for forgetting a hat.

"But Hop..." Joyce began but he had already exited the vehicle and closed the door. "Oh, for Christ's sake."

Joyce slowly and quietly opened the door and stepped out into the frigid night. She shivered as she clutched the rifle in her hands. Hopper was waiting for her in front of the car. Once she reached his

side, he nodded towards the front gate and began walking towards it.

Upon reaching the guard shack, Hopper motioned for Joyce to hold up. "Doesn't look like there's anyone patrolling around. Everyone must be inside. Let's keep going."

"Hop, wait. Maybe Mike and the others already found El and left," Joyce whispered. "You have your radio on you, try to get ahold of the boys."

Oh, that's a good idea... Hopper said to himself.

He wasn't going to admit that out loud though. Instead, he simply mumbled his consent as he fidgeted with his jacket and pulled out his transmitter. He turned the device back on and adjusted it to the channel Will and the boys had been using.

"This is Ho..." He stopped himself for a moment as he thought about how to identify himself. He wasn't sure if others would be listening in.

Screw it.

"This is Hopper. Does anyone copy me, over?"

The crackle of static was the only reply for several seconds until the faint sound of a voice finally broke through.

"This is Jonathan. We copy you. Over."

Hopper could hear Joyce breathe a sigh of relief as she heard her son's voice, confirming that both boys were there and presumably alright.

"Have you heard anything from... anyone else? Over."

"No, nothing yet. Are you there? What's going on? Over." Jonathan was doing all of the talking while Will was looking on. The younger boy's face was terribly pale and he was desperate for any good news.

Hopper glanced over at Joyce and then up at the building looming in

front of them. "Keep the radio on this channel. I'll be in touch. Over an..."

The explosions were deafening.

Mike and El could barely hear Lucas and Max's screams over the ringing in their ears. Steven vanished in an instant. El pushed away from Mike and rushed to the door as Mike flailed around wildly.

With her arm outstretched, El was just about to exit the room when she was knocked backwards and fell to floor with a sickening thud.

"EL!!!" Mike screamed as he rushed towards her.

El blinked as she tried to process what had just happened. There was a body on top of her and a familiar shade of red hair seemingly everywhere.

"Ugghh," Max groaned as she rolled off of El. "My head..."

Mike had reached El and was in the process of picking her up when he heard Lucas cry out.

"HELP! SOMEBODY, HELP!!" He shouted from somewhere in the hallway.

The second El was back on her feet Mike turned and sprinted out the door. This time, it was El's turn to cry out.

"MIKE! NO!" She screamed as she stumbled forward, still a bit shaken from the fall. Max had righted herself as well and was holding her head as she stared at El in shock.

Mike entered the hallway but it looked more like a warzone. The air was filled with smoke and dust and there was a pile of debris about twenty feet down from him. The stairwell door had been blown off its

hinges and had crashed into the opposite wall, causing even more destruction.

Lucas was lying on the floor nearby and his legs were covered in what appeared to be a good size chunk of the ceiling.

“Mike! Quick, help me get this off me,” Lucas begged as Mike rushed to his side. “I was standing wi... with Max and then I heard something outside of the door and... ouch!” He yelped as Mike pulled on a big piece of the debris on top of his right leg.

“I was running back to the room with Max but then there was an explosion and...”

And then the remaining rubble flew off of Lucas and crashed into the nearby wall. The boys both turned to see El standing over them.

“Go. Back in the room,” El said in a commanding voice. Before either one of them could make a move, they felt themselves sliding backwards across the floor.

“Whoa!” Lucas cried out as he and Mike were moving as if being pulled by an invisible rope. Mike never took her eyes off of El, but she never looked back at them. She was too busy focused on the opening in the wall as the dust continued to settle.

El felt a familiar tingle as Steven suddenly appeared at her side. “Something’s not right. I couldn’t see... COVER YOURS EARS AND CLOSE YOUR EY...!!”

Steven screamed at El as a metallic canister clanked against the hallway floor in front of them. His outburst caught her completely off guard and she was only able to partially cover her ears before a blinding flash of light accompanied by a thunderous noise assaulted her senses.

El was knocked to the ground by the force of the blast. All she could see was white and all she could hear was a shrill ringing.

What happened!? Why can’t I see? Where’s Stev... where’s Mike!? She thought while in a complete panic.

“MIKE! MIKE! MIKE!” El could feel her throat vibrate but she couldn’t hear the words leave her mouth.

And then she felt hands grabbing her arm. And then another hand on her other arm. In her state of complete confusion and panic, El did the only thing she could think of to save herself. With a yell, a wave of power burst forth from her tiny body. The hands were gone instantly and she fell back on to the hard, tiled floor.

As El’s vision began to clear, she could see the face of a person leaning down. For the first time, El felt comforted by the set of blue eyes staring down at her. She could tell he was trying to tell her something, but she couldn’t make out what.

It didn’t take much longer for El to figure it out. A few slowly mouthed words. A gesture. The turn of a head.

The soldier’s movements were practiced and precise. The way he moved his feet. The way he held his weapon. The way his eyes scanned the entire hallway and surveyed the situation immediately.

El could tell he was saying something, but it wasn’t directed toward her. He was currently focused on something behind her. She turned her head and saw Mike and Lucas getting on their feet. El felt a twisting pain in her chest as she realized that it must have been her friends who were trying to help her. It was them who bore the brunt of her power.

The look on Mike’s face was one of sheer terror as the soldier aimed his gun directly at the boy’s chest. El whipped her head back around and focused all of her feelings on the weapon. The man holding it cried out as the gun began twisting and contorting unnaturally until it was reduced to nothing more than a useless ball of metal.

Blood began running from El’s nose but she ignored it. As the ringing lessened in intensity, she could finally distinguish the myriad voices surrounding her. Mike’s desperate plea, the soldier cursing in anger, Steven screaming to watch out.

Watch out?

The impact was minimal but the pain was intense. El stared at the object lodged in her shoulder with shock and confusion. Steven's reaction was far more pronounced.

Steven screamed as he morphed before her eyes. Where there once was a handsome boy now stood a giant, monstrous creature. It had long muscular limbs, menacing claws, terrifying teeth and was covered in thick, black hair.

Even though the soldier had already witnessed Seven's harmless trickery, he still reacted in a similar fashion.

"JESUS CHRIST!" The man yelled as he grabbed his sidearm and unloaded the full clip at the beast as it seemingly attacked him.

"EL! QUICK, GET UP!" Mike shouted as the gunfire continued.

El heard the altercation and Mike's cry clearly but was completely entranced by what she had just pulled out of her body: A short cylindrical object with a longer and much thinner metal rod sticking out the front of it.

The former test subject wasn't a stranger to needles. El's body had been subjected to hundreds if not thousands of injections during her twelve years in this facility. But this one felt different. She felt a wave of something cold coursing through her body. It made her shudder.

"CEASE FIRE YOU IDIOT!" Someone close by suddenly yelled.

El raised her head as two more individuals appeared out of the darkness of the stairwell. Both of them were holding weapons but one of the guns looked much different than anything she had ever seen.

"SECURE THE TARGET!" The taller man shouted.

El blinked and raised her arm in defense as two men approached her. Steven ended his spectral attack and the image he had conjured disappeared in a flash.

She held in a breath as she focused on the men in front of her. And then nothing happened. Nothing at all.

And then El suddenly felt more afraid than she ever had in her entire life.

Lucas slammed his palms against his ears as Mike did the same. Even so, the explosion was louder than anything they had ever heard before. Luckily, it was only their hearing that was negatively impacted by the flash-bang grenade as both had turned away from the blast just in time.

After the initial shock wore off, Mike leapt to his feet and dashed towards El, who was lying on her back against the floor.

“MIKE! MIKE! MIKE!”

He heard El screaming his name in a voice filled with fear and pain and it crushed him.

“I’m right here El! I got you,” Mike replied, unaware that she couldn’t hear a thing.

He immediately grabbed El’s arm and began pulling her up while asking her if she was alright. To his complete shock, a hobbling Lucas joined in on the effort by grabbing ahold of her other arm.

“EEAAHHH!!!” Was the sound of a terrified girl’s scream.

The boys suddenly felt themselves flying backwards, landing with a thud right back where they started.

“OWWW!!” Lucas yelped as his injured leg bore the brunt of the impact.

Mike didn’t say anything. He had gotten the wind knocked out of him and was struggling to suck in air. As he turned himself around, he saw Steven materialize over El.

“Jane, they’re coming! Get ready to take out the first one. Jane! Can you hear me?” Steven was trying to talk quietly but he realized that she was oblivious to what he was saying. He slowing mouthed some words to her and pointed at the stairwell. It appeared that she began to understand.

“Stay where you are!” The soldier shouted as he entered the hallway. His eyes flickered over Seven and Eleven before focusing on two males behind them. “Get down or I’ll shoot!”

Mike stared at the gun in the man’s hands. It was pointed straight at him. In an instant, his whole life flashed before his eyes. He thought about his family. He thought about his friends. The happy times. The sad. The good times. The bad.

But most of all, he thought about Eleven. He thought about when they met. How he helped save her. And how she had saved him. How he felt about her. How he had just failed her.

How he was going to die.

But Michael Wheeler didn’t die. Instead, he watched in awe as Eleven protected him from harm once again.

“WHAT THE FUCK!” The soldier dropped the mangled weapon to the ground as he screamed in shock.

And then Mike saw another danger that El had missed. But it was too late. He only had time to utter a single word.

“EL!” His eyes went as wide as dinner plates.

Steven had noticed it too.

“WATCH OUT!” Steven exclaimed as he leapt in front of El in a futile attempt to shield her.

The flash of a muzzle. The clear impact on El’s body. A feeling of pure horror.

“NOOOO!”

It was Steven who screamed first. Everyone watched as he transformed into a gigantic and terrifying werewolf and threw himself at the soldier closest to him. The others chimed in as well with various emotions.

“JESUS CHRIST!” With fear.

“EL! QUICK GET UP!” With desperation.

“CEASE FIRE YOU IDIOT!” With anger.

“LEAVE HER ALONE!” With confidence.

The werewolf vanished from view.

“SECURE THE TARGET!”

“LEAVE HER ALONE!” Lucas screamed as he released the pouch of his trusty wrist rocket. The small rock contained within dealt a painful, though, insignificant blow to the closest attacker.

“OWW! What the...? You stupid kid!” Lieutenant Harris snapped as he stopped and pointed his gun at the dark-skinned boy.

“Harris! Ignore them!” Colonel Maddox instructed as he walked towards the group. “Listen kids, we don’t want to hurt you but I swear to God I’ll kill each and every one of you myself if...”

“Hey, assholes! Catch!” Max had bounded out from the office doorway with something in her right hand. Summoning all of her strength, she hurled the object towards the man who was just about to take hold of El.

The switchblade buried itself in his shoulder as he howled in pain.

“EEEEOOOOOWWW!” Sergeant Peterson screamed as he recoiled and

grabbed his arm. "Are you fucking kidding me!?"

"Alright, that's it. You kids want to keep playing games, so be it," Maddox said as he raised his rifle and pointed it at the two boys and one girl standing now standing together. They stared back at him with defiance. "Say goodbye to your friends, E..."

"Eleven."

The voice was cold and calculating. It was authoritative and familiar. Everyone turned their heads to the source of it. There was an older man was walking slowing towards them. Tall, slender, white hair and wearing a black suit and tie.

"Where have you been, Eleven? I've missed you." Dr. Brenner said as his lips cracked into a slight smile.

El was still lying on the floor, finding it more and more difficult to keep herself propped up. Whatever was in that needle had stolen her power and sapped her strength. She was certain that this was yet another one of Steven's tricks, but it looked so real. *He* looked so real.

Papa...

"What about you, Colonel? Happy to see me again?" He asked, coming to a halt.

"It's over, Seven," another voice answered from just within the stairwell. Loud footsteps could be heard as the man entered the hallway, revealing himself to everyone.

"You lost," Dr. Pfeiffer stated firmly. He was not the least bit startled by Seven's latest disguise. "You think you're so clever. But you're nothing but a hapless fool."

"A fool thinks himself to be wise, but a wise man knows himself to be a fool," Dr. Brenner replied in whisper.

"It was you who led us here," Dr. Pfeiffer continued, ignoring the boy. "We may never have found Eleven again if it wasn't for you. You're the reason she'll soon be back in a lab and her friends will all be dead."

“You’re correct, Doctor,” Seven said as his masquerade vanished. His new form was his true one. Pale, thin, dirty, scarred and bleeding profusely. “I led you all here. I brought you to Jane. And she’s been killing you. One by one.” He chuckled as he surveyed the area. “There are so few of you left to kill.”

“And who will be killing us, boy?” The doctor chuckled as he turned his gaze to the trio of children behind him and the test subject who was struggling to remain upright. “The one with the empty slingshot? The unarmed boy and girl who already used her only weapon? Oh, you must mean Subject Eleven. No, no I don’t think she’ll be doing any more killing tonight. The drugs took care of that.”

“You’re right again, Eric. None of them will be killing you,” Steven replied as he breathed in deeply.

Steven studied the older man before looking at each of the remaining three military men. Their eyes were all focused on him once again. He peered down the hall at El’s friends and gave the slightest of nods. He decided that he really liked them. All four of them.

Steven then locked eyes with El. He saw two brown. Jane saw two blue. And then she was almost positive that she saw one of them close and open quickly. It was as if he was winking at her.

Oh no...

“So, I guess that just leaves me,” Steven snapped as he reached behind his back and grabbed a gun. “NOW DIE!”

“Wha...!? It’s him! FIRE!” Colonel Maddox ordered as he raised his rifle.

Once again, the hallway was filled with the terrible sights and sounds of combat. Bullets were whizzing through the air, careening off of walls and piercing through flesh. There were screams of anger. There were wails of pain. There was blood.

There was always so much blood.

Notes for the Chapter:

So yea... all those times I said 'the next chapter is going to be the last one!' and that wasn't true? Well, this time it is 100% true. There will be one more chapter - definitely not this long - to conclude the story. I apologize for the extremely long wait as this summer has been busier than most. Work, vacation, family and friend commitments etc. Whew!

I really hope everyone enjoys this latest installment. I rewrote the entire second act as my first draft was just too hokey and light. ANYWAY, the battle is raging and the big question is who will survive? With El seemingly powerless, it doesn't look promising for everyone, but those kids are a resourceful bunch. I hope to complete this story within the next two weeks. This will not drag into September. I promise you that. In fact, I Mike promise you!

Thanks for reading!

14. Dust to Dust

Summary for the Chapter:

El's body went rigid as she watched the bullets enter him. One, two, three. All in quick succession and each impact more violent than the previous. And then she heard him gasp as he fell to his knees. It seemed like he was going to collapse but then his head began to rise up. Their eyes met.

Notes for the Chapter:

Yeah, so I promised I'd get the last chapter out by the end of August. Oh boy, has this been a week filled with late night writing... Promise fulfilled!!!

Fire, fire, burning bright,

Transform darkness into light,

Singe my flesh and stifle blight,

Extinguish now my mortal plight.

Dustin paced back and forth across the room. Every now and then he'd shoot a glance at the closed door, but his eyes were primarily focused on the limp body sitting in the corner chair. He had been tasked with staying in the front room and keeping watch over Steven while the others left with El.

The boy became more and more restless as the minutes ticked by. It was just too quiet in the room for his liking. Dustin let out a heavy sigh as he stopped in front of the table in the middle of the room. The handgun was lying on it once again.

"Do not play with the gun when I'm gone," Steven had instructed. After the others had left the room and he was alone with Dustin, he began loading the weapon. Dustin watched as the bullets filled the

magazine, one by one.

“See this switch on the side?” Steven asked while turning the gun to its side. “That’s the safety. If you think we’re in danger, and I mean serious danger, then remember to flip the safety off. If you don’t, the gun won’t fire and we’ll both die. Well, we’ll probably die anyway but at least it’ll be less embarrassing.”

Dustin was a bit miffed by Steven’s lack of confidence in his ability to defend them. He doubted that Steven had ever come face to face with a Demogorgon. And it was he who had been able to subdue the demodog D’Artanyan in the tunnels, allowing him and his friends to escape unharmed.

“What’s taking them so long...” Dustin mumbled as he removed his hat and ran a hand through his hair.

“Patience is a virtue,” Steven said as Dustin yelped in surprise.

“Shit! Don’t do that!” Dustin exclaimed as he held a hand against his chest. “You’re going to give me a heart attack!”

“My apologies,” Steven replied. “El’s getting in place now. It looks like two of them on the Third Floor. That means the other three are biding their time somewhere else.”

“Wait, you don’t know where they are?” Dustin gasped as he looked back at the door, praying that it would remain shut.

“Calm down, buddy. They’re definitely not up here... yet.” Steven replied with a sigh. He had tried to locate the remaining men with a series of quick appearances to the most likely hiding areas, but was unsuccessful.

“Alright,” he continued. “See these two cabinets next to me? Be a pal and move them to the side. Oh, and don’t worry they’re empty. I’m sure you can handle it.”

After an audible groan, Dustin shuffled over to the first cabinet and began pulling it down the wall. To his surprise, it was indeed quite light. He was able to finish the task quickly and was surprised by what was revealed behind the office furniture.

“Holy crap! It’s a tunnel!” Dustin said as he dropped to his knees to peer through it. “Where does it go?”

“Where does it go!?” Steven repeated with mock annoyance. “It leads to Narnia. We’re going to recruit Aslan and a bunch of centaurs to help us fight...”

“Huh?” Dustin asked as he continued to examine the hole in the wall.

“Never mind...” Steven said with a chuckle. “It allows us to reach the rooms on the other side of the hall. The rooms over there all have connecting doors so we can bypass the hallway if we need to escape.”

“Oh, awesome! That was really smart!” Dustin replied. “You’re really good at this stuff.”

Steven was about to say something sarcastic but he stopped himself. He could tell that Dustin was being genuine. He was glad to have him there.

“Alright, I gotta head back. Stay safe,” Steven said as he leaned back against the chair. “But be prepared for anything okay?”

“Aye, aye, sir!” Dustin said with a smile and salute.

And then the room was quiet once more.

Dustin got back on his feet and resumed his pacing regimen. He looked out of the windows but not much had changed. It had started snowing again, but just barely. He thought about Mike’s message to Will and wondered if anyone was coming to their aide.

Please, oh please don’t make us have to walk all the back home, Dustin silently prayed.

More time. More pacing. More silence.

But the silence was abruptly interrupted by a cacophonous noise from somewhere outside the room.

“Son of a bitch!” Dustin screeched. “What the Hell was tha...?”

“Dustin!”

“Shit!” Dustin yelled again as practically spun in a complete circle.

“Grab the gun, get over here now!” Steven commanded as he tried to push himself up in the chair.

“What happened!?” Dustin asked with concern but did as instructed without delay

“No time. You gotta take my body through the wall and bring me down to the other end of the hallway,” Steven said as he wiped away an unsettling amount of blood from the lower half of his face.

“T-take your body? Wait, wh-what?” Dustin stammered. He was holding the gun in his hands and was standing just in front of the chair.

“Dustin, focus!” Steven begged while staring up at the boy. “I need to get back to them. Carry me, push me, drag me, I don’t care. Just get me over there and keep heading through the doors until you come to a locked one. Okay?”

Dustin swallowed hard and nodded his head up and down a bunch of times. “Yeah, okay. You can count on me.”

“I know I can. See you on the other side,” Steven replied before his eyes closed shut and he fell back against the chair.

“Damnit. Think, think...” Dustin said aloud as he contemplated how to proceed.

He was holding the gun in his right hand and kept changing his mind about what to do with it. It did not end up stuck in his boot or wedged in his front pants pocket. He didn’t want to put his jacket back on and knew he couldn’t carry both it and Steven’s body at the same time.

Dustin had been reluctant to store it like how he had seen in the movies, but he didn’t want to waste any more time. With a sigh, he

reached behind himself and shoved the gun under his belt so it was pointing straight down. Dustin thought that if he had witnessed one of his friends doing this, he would have made a joke about shooting themselves a new butthole. The thought didn't make him feel any better.

With the weapon stowed away, Dustin leaned down grabbed Steven's arms. He paused as he made contact, but there was no movement or response.

"So weird..." Dustin mumbled as he hoisted Steven up. "Ooomph! You're heavier than you look."

His arms wrapped around Steven's chest, Dustin half carried him over to the nearby hole. He carefully laid the limp body on the ground and crawled backwards through the makeshift tunnel. Once he was about halfway through, he grabbed ahold of Steven's arms and began pulling him along.

Slowly and surely, they both made it to the other side. This new room was far sparser. A simple desk and chair were the only remaining pieces of furniture. Dustin saw the open door connecting the room to the next one. And then he saw another open door leading to another room. And so on.

With a heave, Dustin pulled Steven up into what was basically a bear hug. Steven's feet dragged on the ground as Dustin began walking backwards towards the open door. He could hear screaming from somewhere in the distance.

Just as he was about halfway through the second room, the unmistakable sound of gunfire caused Dustin to stumble.

"OH SHI..." He began to scream, but quickly cut himself off. Dustin knew it was definitely not the right time to draw attention to himself. He rearranged his grasp on Steven and tried to pick up the pace.

Another room entered and exited. More yelling. Dustin whipped his head around and the final room appeared to the next one. The door he saw at the end of it was definitely closed.

A few moments later he recognized one of the voices in the hallway: Lucas. From the scream that followed, Dustin surmised that Lucas had engaged a target.

Damnit, Lucas! They have guns! Dustin screamed internally as even more sweat began pouring down his face.

“Dustin,” Steven whispered, pleading that the boy wouldn’t get startled and yell. “Stop here.”

Thankfully, Dustin did not yell as he had been trying to mentally prepare himself for Steven’s return. He released the frail boy, but not before making sure he was back on his feet.

“You did great. Give me the gun,” Steven said while reaching out.

“O-okay,” Dustin replied as he reached around and removed it from its hiding place.

Steven snatched the gun from Dustin’s hand as soon as it came into view. He quickly switched off the safety - he didn’t have time to rebuke Dustin for not doing that earlier - before sliding it into the same area as Dustin had chosen.

“Go all the way back, go into the hall and get the others,” Steven instructed as he hobbled to the door and opened it. “Get them back to the front room quickly and safely.”

“Wha-what are you going to do,” Dustin asked but didn’t receive a response. Dustin scurried over to the door and peeked around just the slightest amount. Steven had disappeared. In his place was the back of a man Dustin instantly recognized.

“Eleven,” he heard Dr. Brenner say. And then the young boy was running faster than he had ever run in his entire life.

“NOW DIE!”

Steven was counting on the element of surprise to buy himself an extra few seconds of time. It was evident that the men had thought he was still just a projected image, even after the veneer of Dr. Brenner fell away.

Thankfully, he had fired a gun before. Many times, in fact. Steven had practiced quite extensively during his travels in the southern part of the country. Unlike some of the other subjects, his power was far more defensive than offensive. That oftentimes left him in a vulnerable position.

Steven was well aware that for normal humans, guns were held in high regard. The weapons provided a person, no matter how weak or fearful, with instant power. The power to fight. The power to conquer. The power to kill. Steven hated that he had to resort to that base level of combat, but alas, he had no other choice.

The frail boy got lucky with the first shot. Steven had aimed at the soldier to his far right. The bullet connected perfectly with the front of the man's head. An instant kill.

The second and third shots were less impressive. The bullets meant for the other soldier's chest struck him instead in the arm. The hits had a positive effect in that they briefly ended the man's ability to engage in combat, but they did not eliminate him from battle.

Those were the only shots Steven was able to take before facing retaliation. He abandoned the two-handed grip as he twisted his body to the side. He hoped that the reduction in target area would allow him to survive a little longer.

The first few rounds meant for Steven missed, but just barely. He could almost feel the heat of the lead as they flew past his unprotected body. For once, he was glad to be so thin and wiry.

Steven's shots four and five followed in quick succession. Both were aimed squarely at Colonel Maddox. Steven had never loathed the man. Based upon their brief interactions over the years, he felt that the aspirational officer had simply allied himself with the wrong

people and then became too entrenched in the department to leave. Steven had provided an opportunity for the Colonel to leave earlier that night, but the man had refused.

As the bullets entered the Colonel's flesh, his mind flashed back to that offer Subject Seven had made. He thought that maybe he should have simply walked away. Since both bullets connected with his left leg, he really hoped that walking at all would be in his future.

Before Maddox collapsed to the ground, he was able to fire off several more rounds from his rifle. The final shots proved to be the most consequential. He hoped his good aim would end the fight. Unfortunately, that was not to be.

There was barely time to react due to the close proximity of the battle. Steven made an effort to further twist his body away from the barrel of the Colonel's gun, but it wasn't enough. The first bullet slammed into his shoulder with such force that he thought his entire arm was blown off. The second connected with his side and spun him half around. The third simply added insult to further injury as it struck him straight in his gut.

Steven hadn't felt such immense pain in years. The memories flooded back to his brain as blood began to flow from his now bullet-ridden body. With an audible gasp, Steven dropped to his knees. His head bobbed a bit before he forced himself to look up.

He saw one soldier clearly dead, one with an arm injury about to re-engage, one with a leg injury scrambling to grab the gun that had slipped from his hands as he hit the ground, one seemingly uninjured older man cowering against the wall, three young kids basically piled on top of each other looking positively terrified and one former test subject rising to her feet.

Steven smiled.

El had been struggling to maintain focus and a semblance of control over her body. She knew that whatever medicine had been injected into her was more powerful than anything she had ever received during her captivity.

It was like a switch had been turned to 'off' in her body. El begged her mind to break free but there was no reply. Her friends were fighting back but all she could was watch. And then she heard those terrible words that threatened to destroy everything she held dear in the world.

"Say goodbye to your friends, E..."

But then El another voice. A much more familiar voice.

"Eleven."

Her eyes went wide and her heart skipped a bit as a rush of adrenaline was released by her brain. There, standing before her, was the man she held responsible for unimaginable cruelty and pain. El knew that besides her, countless others, including her friends, had suffered dearly because of him.

Papa...

But El also knew in her heart that Dr. Martin Brenner wasn't really in standing in front of them. She remembered the trick that Kali had played on her mind. While clearly fake, the impact was still just as powerful as if he was truly there. She knew Steven was capable of the same deception. And then the disguise vanished and El's assumption was proved correct.

It was Steven now. The real Steven. She could see him fairly clearly, her vision improving by the second. In her opinion, he looked worse than ever. His skin was paler and his face and shirt were covered in fresh blood.

Blood. He's bleeding. He's bleeding right now... El thought as her heart began beating faster and faster.

"No, no I don't think she'll be doing any more killing tonight. The drugs took care of that..."

El locked eyes with Steven. They were radiant blue. And then one of the eyes closed and opened quickly and she knew what was about to happen.

Please don't, she silently begged.

“NOW DIE!” Steven screamed as he raised his gun and pulled the trigger.

Once again El's ears were assaulted by the deafening sound of gunfire. She ignored the noise as the battle raged in front of her. Both of the men to her left were hit. And then the man on the right. And then Steven.

El's body went rigid as she watched the bullets enter him. One, two, three. All in quick succession and each impact more violent than the previous. And then she heard him gasp as he fell to his knees. It seemed like he was going to collapse but then his head began to rise up. Their eyes met.

Somewhere and somehow the switch had been flipped. Whatever it was that had prevented El from accessing the power of her mind had been eradicated. El could feel that familiar warmth rising up from deep within her. That warmth created a spark. That spark started a fire. That fire became an inferno.

“I want you to find something from your life. Something that angers you. Now channel it...”

With Kali's words echoing in her mind, El's body rose itself up from the floor. She could see the smile begin to spread on Steven's face as she stared at the surviving soldiers.

The one to her left was preparing to fire his gun. With just a slight twitch of El's head, his body was hurled backwards against the wall before crumpling to the floor. He didn't move anymore.

El then focused on the man the floor to her right. He was holding a gun but wasn't pointing it at Steven. It was aimed directly at her.

She saw the hatred in his eyes. She heard the weapon fire. She watched as the projectile stopped in mid-air, a foot in front of her

chest. She reached out and tapped it with her finger, causing the needle-tipped canister to fall harmlessly to the floor.

“You stupid girl!” the older man huddled against the wall cried out. “Don’t you realize the importance of what you can do!? Those powers you have, Eleven,” Dr. Pfeiffer continued. “Who do you think discovered them? Who nurtured them? Who can help you maximize their potential?”

El stared at the sputtering, red-faced man. She grew angrier and angrier with each passing word. Her hands were practically vibrating.

“Don’t let Seven poison your mind with his lies,” Dr. Pfeiffer said as he began to pick himself off the ground. “Look what happened to him after he left us. He wasted his potential, he struggled to survive. We won’t let that happen to you, Eleven. We’ll give you a home...”

“We gave her a home,” Mike interrupted as he walked over to El’s side.

“We’ll keep you safe!” Dr. Pfeiffer was not backing down.

“We keep her safe,” Lucas said, as he hobbled over to El with Max’s help.

“That’s right,” Max added. “And we always will.”

Although still filled with fury, El sensed the unmistakable feeling of love radiating inside her.

“Don’t listen to them, Eleven!” The scientist was shaking with rage. “You’re special. Together, we could do anything. We could save the world!”

“She already has,” Dustin stated as he rejoined his friends. “And she’s going to do it again tonight.”

The Party was whole again: Mike, Lucas, Dustin, Max and El. The five companions stood shoulder to shoulder as they faced down this newest evil together as one.

“El will never go back with you.” Mike said as he grasped El’s right

hand. "You won't get to hurt her or keep her locked up ever again."

"You know nothing, you ignorant fool!" Dr. Pfeiffer snapped back.

"Talk sense to a fool and he calls you foolish," Steven slowly mumbled. It was becoming more difficult for him to speak. "Finish it, Jane."

"Maddox!" Dr. Pfeiffer yelled in a panic at the wounded military man. "Do something!"

The Colonel looked into the eyes of Eleven and her friends. He then glanced over at Seven who was still kneeling and bleeding profusely but exuding nothing but confidence. Finally, he turned his head around and stared at the man he had dutifully followed for over a decade.

There were so few pleasant memories during that time. The majority were distasteful. Some were downright horrifying. He wished he could forget but all he did was remember.

"What would you like me to do, Erik?" Maddox asked with a guffaw. "Shoot them? I don't think a gun is a very effective weapon right now."

"You coward!" Dr. Pfeiffer shrieked as he quickly bent down and grasped a weapon from the floor and raised it in one swift motion. "If you won't do it then I wi..."

He didn't get to finish the sentence. Mike could feel El's hand pulse as she unleashed her pent-up rage on the mad scientist. It only took a second for the man to feel her wrath.

Dr. Pfeiffer wasn't simply picked off the ground: He was hurled backwards through the blasted-apart doorway. The sound of his body smashing into the stairwell wall and dropping onto the stairs below was palpable.

"Queen takes Bishop... check" Steven said quietly as he finally succumbed to his injuries and sank to the floor.

"Steven!" El yelped as she untangled her fingers from Mike's firm grip and hurried over to the boy.

“El, wait!” Dustin exclaimed as he broke off from the group as well. “What about this guy?”

El stopped on a dime and turned to the man she now knew as Maddox. His face was difficult to read. His hardened features made him appear angry but there was also something else expressed on his face. El didn’t think it looked like fear. More acceptance mixed with sadness or regret.

“Do what you want, girl” Col. Maddox said to Subject Eleven as he slid himself over to the wall and leaned against it with a sigh. “Go ahead, kill me. I won’t beg for my life.”

El turned towards her friends. Lucas and Max nodded their heads. Dustin did as well. She locked eyes with Mike. He agreed. She had hoped that he wouldn’t.

The arm began to rise as the power within El’s mind tingled in anticipation. She was going to make it quick and end this horrible ordeal once and for all.

“Jane.”

El whipped her head back around to Steven. The side of his face was pressed against the floor and blood was pooling beneath it.

“No more... no more killing... not by you... never again.” Steven said through chokes and gasps. “Just let him go.” His eyes remained closed.

El refocused her attention on Maddox, who looked utterly shocked. His mouth hung open a bit as he stared at the seemingly dying boy.

“I...” The Colonel began, but El didn’t give him a chance to finish. With a slight flick of her head, his was knocked back against the wall, causing his body to slump over. She had used only a modicum of her power on him. It was just enough to render him unconscious.

“Whoa!” Dustin yelled, as the sudden action caused him to jump.

“Oh, shit. Is he going to be okay?” Mike asked with true concern in his voice as he rushed towards where El was standing.

Mike's sudden worry for the man who threatened to kill him just moments ago didn't surprise El. She knew firsthand what a kind and considerate person he was.

"I just knocked him out. He should be fine," El replied.

"Huh?" Mike asked, as he stopped in front of her. "I don't mean *him*!" He said, pointing at Maddox. He didn't think he could care any less about that man's fate. "I mean Steven!"

STEVEN! El silently screamed as she turned around and dropped to her knees in front of the boy. She couldn't tell if he was still breathing.

"Steven! Wake up! Please!" El begged as she gently lifted his head. She felt the slightest exhale of breath against her hand and gasped in relief. "He's alive!"

"Oh man. He looks bad guys," Dustin said. He and Mike had both joined El on the floor as they tried to lift his body.

"Should you really be moving him?" Max asked as she continued to support Lucas against her body.

"Well, we can't leave him here," Mike replied. "Let's bring him back to the front room. Maybe... uhh... maybe he has something that can help."

"You want us to carry him?" Dustin asked, thinking of how difficult it had been to carry a non-injured Steven.

El's eyes darted around Steven's frail body. She could see the wounds. Her hands were covered in his blood. She didn't think he would survive even the short trip down the hall if her friends tried to carry him.

"I'll do it," El said as she motioned for the boys to back up. Now standing up again, El focused on the body. Slowly and steadily, the body began to rise from the floor. It remained perfectly still as it floated in front of her.

"Wow..." Was all Lucas could say as it drifted past him.

“C’mon guys, let’s go.” Mike said as he followed alongside El and Steven’s hovering body. “The sooner we get back to the room, the sooner we can get out of here.”

“Did anyone hear back from Will or anyone?” Lucas asked as he and Max began to walk with them. He gritted his teeth in pain after the first steps.

That question caused Mike to freeze in place. “Oh no...” He said, cupping his face in the palms of his hands. “I... I forgot to turn the Supercom back on when we got up here. I’m such an idiot!”

“Mike, you’re not an idiot.” Dustin reassured him. “You told him to tell the others. He got the message.”

“Yeah? Well where are they then?” Lucas grumbled as they began entering the room.

Steven’s levitating body was laid to rest on the table as the others gathered around him. Dustin grabbed a towel from a pile against the wall, most of which were covered in blood, and placed it under the boy’s head.

“Grab some more towels. Try to find clean ones to put on his wounds,” Mike instructed to the others as he helped Max lead Lucas over to the chair.

El stood over the bleeding figure trying to think about what to do. She pushed up his sleeve and saw the first bullet hole. Without a second thought, El hovered her hand over the hole and pulled with her mind. As the chunk of metal exited Steven’s body, his eyes flew open.

“ARRGGHH!” Steven yelled as a fresh wave of pain flooded washed over him. “Jesus Christ, what the fuc...” He stopped screaming once his eyes met Jane’s. Nothing brought him more calm than seeing those eyes. He finally broke eye contact and noticed the bloodied bullet in her hand.

“Jane,” Steven began. “I appreciate the help but please don’t do that again. I’m done for. You can’t save me.”

Dustin had returned with a decently clean looking towel. "Don't say that! Help's on the way, right Mike?" He asked but didn't wait for an answer. "We can stop the bleeding and... and then..."

"What? Take me to a hospital?" Steven chuckled before coughing up some blood. His entire body seemed to seize up every after cough. "Holy shit, that hurts."

Jane looked down at his small, pale hand and grasped it like Mike did with hers. Their fingers were quickly interwoven. She always felt cold, but his body felt positively frozen.

"Hopper," she said. "He can help you. He'll know what to do."

"The only thing that needs to be done now is for you to leave this place," Steven replied faintly. "All of you need to go. Right now."

"Not without you!" Dustin exclaimed as he reached for the boy's shirt. "Let's get this thing off."

"No, wait!" Steven gasped, but it was too late. Dustin had ripped the bloodied piece of clothing in two, exposing his chest and revealing the full extent of his injuries.

"Jesus Christ!" Dustin yelled as he stepped back.

"What happened?" Mike asked as he ran over to them holding another towel. "Oh..."

Max had abandoned Lucas' side as she too made her way over to the commotion. He begrudgingly began pulling himself up. Within a second of reaching the table, Max gasped as she observed the innumerable lines of crisscrossed scars on his flesh. And the burn marks. And the fresh bullet wounds. The sight made her shudder.

Steven had expected Jane to flee from his ravaged form as well, but she remained at his side. Her hand never left his and was clutching it even firmer than before.

"Some of us wear our scars on the outside," Steven said with unsteady breathing. "Others wear them on the inside," he continued, meeting Jane's eyes once again. "It's alright Jane. It was all worth it

to meet you. You ended it tonight. You ended the suffering.”

“I’m sorry,” Jane said as her eyes watered up. She had, up until quite recently, been distrustful of Steven. She may have even hated him at times. But she felt much differently now.

“Kali is my sister,” Jane continued. “And you’re... my brother.”

Steven inhaled deeply, ignoring the sharp pain, after hearing Jane’s words. “Brother and sister, huh?” He smiled at her as another trickle of blood escaped his lips. “Well, it is almost Christmas and I’ve always said that family should be together for the holidays...”

“Holy shit! Guys, I think I saw headlights!” Lucas cried out as he let his body lean against the cold glass. “They came fo...”

The sickening sound of a single gunshot sliced through the air.

Jane’s hand fell from Steven’s. What little warmth she had provided for him had been extinguished in an instant.

He felt like he had just been run over by a car. He tried to push himself up but only felt pain. His head was pounding and his body ached like never before. His arm felt as though it was on fire.

There was a ringing in his ears and his vision was blurry. He blinked a few times and tried to survey his surroundings. There was debris everywhere. Ceiling tiles, parts of the wall, bullet casings and something large lying near him.

That’s a body, he quickly surmised. *What the fuck happe...?*

And then he remembered the girl. He was about to shoot the male subject when she had risen up and looked over at him. He gave her only the slightest glance but the look in her eyes was unmistakable: Fury.

He didn't remember anything after that. As he slowly forced himself up, he could hear voices in the distance. They sounded young. The ringing still present and he knew it wasn't going away anytime soon.

With an audible groan that he was unable to contain, he brought himself up to his knees. He looked down at his arm. He remembered being struck twice. The bone was definitely shattered.

Fuck...

Turning his head, he saw the body of his comrade. It was clear that he was dead. Colonel Maddox was hunched over against the far wall. No sign of the old doctor.

Mustering all of his remaining strength, Lieutenant Harris forced himself back up onto his feet and began shuffling towards the other side of the hall.

"Colonel Maddox?" He whispered. "Colonel Maddox?" There was no reply.

The soldier reached his fallen leader and pressed a hand against his throat. There was a steady pulse.

Just unconscious, Harris determined.

Reaching into a side pocket, Harris produced a small plastic box. He was glad to see that it was undamaged. It opened with a snap and he removed two of the syringes.

Full dose for him, half for me, he told himself.

After squirting out half the fluid in one of the syringes, he rolled up the sleeve on his injured arm and injected himself. His eyes went wide and his heart began beating fast almost immediately. He felt warmer. He felt energized.

Harris turned his attention to the Colonel. This time, he did not waste any of the dose. After exposing the man's wrist, the needle was forced into the flesh. Harris then removed the empty syringe and covered the Colonel's mouth with his hand.

This is gonna suck...

A second later, Maddox's eyes flew open and his body jerked as he screamed into Harris' hand.

"Colonel, it's me. Colonel!" Harris whispered as he tried to hold the man's head steady while muffling his yells. "You have to be quiet!"

Maddox's eyes were darting rapidly back and forth as he tried to determine where he was, what had happened and why he was on the floor with someone's hand over his mouth. His heart felt like it was going to beat out of his chest. He felt warm...

Remember your training, a voice from the depths of his brain whispered.

Deep breathes in and out. Eyes closed to reset focus. Allowing the body to go limp. Emptying the mind of all thought.

It seemed like an eternity, but less than a minute passed before Maddox re-opened his eyes. Harris knew it was then okay to remove his hand so he did so, although slowly.

"Where are they?" The Colonel asked as he looked around. He saw the body of Peterson. He remembered where the doctor's body ended up.

"I think they're down the hallway. There's a room at the end. Light's one," Harris replied as he nodded in that direction.

"Get me up," Maddox commanded. "Retrieve two weapons. Make sure they're loaded."

Lt. Harris did as he was told and both men were on their feet and armed a minute later. Maddox was barely able to put weight on his injured leg, but he wasn't going to ask for help. He knew the other man had been shot as well and he didn't seem to be complaining.

My leg. His arm. Shit... Maddox thought as he glared at the far room.

"Let's move out. Slowly and quietly," he whispered to Harris. "We'll take them by surprise. Target Subject Eleven first. Shoot to kill."

“Kill? But sir, orders were to...” Lt. Harris began before the Colonel’s stern glare silenced him.

“The orders have changed,” Maddox stated emphatically. He didn’t need to say anything further. The expression of pure wrath on his face spoke volumes.

As ordered, Lt. Harris began moving forward down the hallway. For the first time, he actually took note of what was painted on the walls. During the battle, he was only focused on the targets and the mission. But now, he was able to truly grasp what was around him.

Blood.

Words. Images. Faces.

What the fuck is all this? He thought to himself.

“Harris! Focus!” The Colonel softly spat, noticing the man’s wandering gaze. “Get ready to take positi...”

By choosing to chastise his companion, Maddox had sacrificed full concentration on his movements. One misstep on his injured leg was all it took for a lightning bolt of pain to crack through the barrier of drugs keeping it at bay. With a stifled gasp, he felt himself falling. His reflexes were too slow. He could not prevent the inevitable.

The sound produced by his body hitting the ground was nothing compared with the noise of his rifle made when it sent a bullet screaming down the hallway.

The element of surprise had surely been surrendered. And yet, two stubborn soldiers refused to do the same.

Jane’s hand jerked away from Steven’s as she jumped backwards. Turning around, she ignored the shrieks and gasps of the others as

she strode straight ahead.

“El, no! Don’t!” Mike cried out as he leapt after her.

“Stop!” Steven yelled, summoning his remaining strength. “Shut the door and bend the lock!”

Jane did what was asked of her and the door slammed shut. The sound of twisting and metal was grating as the door sealed itself shut on her command.

“There’s more of them!?” Max yelled as she ran over to a help a stumbling Lucas.

“We gotta get the Hell outta here!” Dustin yelled, throwing arms in the air as if his friends were not aware of the situation.

“Everyone, shut up for a second,” Steven took a deep breath before his eyes rolled backwards.

“Is he really leaving ag...?”

“ERRRAAGGH!” Steven yelled as his eyes reopened a few seconds later. “Oh my God. Oh fuck...” He said, gasping for air.

“How many?” Jane asked as she stared at him. Her concern was overshadowed by a renewed rage.

Steven was having difficulty focusing on the girl. Four brown eyes were now staring back at him. He shook his head back and forth as he tried to fight back the pain.

“No. I told you, no more. You’re leaving this place, Jane.” Steven said with complete seriousness. “Dustin,” he continued. “Take them through the wall. All the way down. To the closed door. Jane can open it.” His sentences were short and punctuated by gasps and shallow breaths.

“What about you?” Dustin asked. He had quickly grown fond of Steven, regardless of what he had done over the last few weeks.

“We don’t abandon people!” Mike stated as he and El returned to the

side of the table. "I don't care who..."

More gunshots. Each bullet slammed into the door with a thunderous bang. The door was made of thick metal, but Steven knew it wasn't impenetrable.

"SHIT!" Lucas's exclamation was by far the loudest. "We gotta go now!"

"Jane, the furniture," Steven mumbled as he nodded in the direction of the door. She immediately understood what to do.

The room suddenly felt much roomier as all of the furniture in the front half of it crashed against the door all at once. Filing cabinets, boxes, a desk and all manner of office décor items had been joined together to form an improvised barricade.

Steven stared at the fresh blood sipping from Jane's nose. It mixed with the dried streaks from before. He could tell the girl was tired.

"Go," He gasped as blood sputtered out of his mouth. "Please, you have to go."

"I can fight them. We can save you," Jane said as she grabbed for his hand again. He pulled it away just before she made contact. She stared back into his eyes as the sound of more gunfire broke out.

"You already have," Steven said as he shot Mike a quick glance. He hoped the kid got the reference. Mike understood perfectly well.

"Now go," Steven finished.

"El, c'mon," Mike said as he tugged at her hand. "He's right. We have to go now. Please."

"Okay," El said in a whisper. "But not before saying goodbye." She looked at her friends expectantly.

Steven couldn't contain a chuckle. "I'll do it. But start leaving immediately after. Hey Max," he began. "You seem cool. Keep an eye on these boys and don't let them give you any shit."

“Oh, uhh... thanks. And I won’t,” Max replied. She was a bit taken aback by the statement.

“Lucas,” Steven said to the hobbling boy. “Sorry about the leg but looks like you’ve got a great nurse so I think everything worked out alright, huh?”

“Umm... yea... it’s alright... and umm...” Lucas stammered as he was unsure of how exactly to respond to the other comments. He looked over at Max and blushed a bit before finally deciding to nod at Steven and leave it at that.

Max guided Lucas to the hole that Dustin was standing next to. She lowered them both to the ground and they began crawling through.

“Dustin,” Steven continued as he turned his head a bit. “You’re the man. You’re the reason everyone is still alive. Take care of yourself, buddy.”

All Dustin could do at first was gape at Steven as he struggled to respond. “I... you were... Your power is super cool and I wish you could be our friend too! I mean...”

“I get it, thank you.” Steven replied with a smirk as he turned his attention to Mike. He didn’t mean to cut Dustin off, but every second that ticked by was one second closer to death. Dustin, already experienced with the escape route, made it through quickly.

“Michael Wheeler,” Steven said with sigh. “I’m sorry for everything I did to you and your friends. And Jane. You’re quite the knight. A true... *paladin*.” He smiled at Mike’s shocked expression.

“Keep Jane safe,” Steven continued. “Promise me, you’ll always do whatever it takes to keep her safe. No matter what.”

“I promise!” Mike replied without hesitation. “I will. And... I’m sorry too. I... we’ll miss you.”

“Psh, yeah right...” Steven said as he turned to Jane after giving Mike a subtle wink.

There was yelling in the hallway. More impacts on the door. They

were getting angrier and angrier. He knew they had more powerful weaponry at their disposal and would not hesitate to utilize it.

“Jane Ives. Subject Eleven. El,” Steven said as he stared into her eyes. “You’re the best of us. Hell, you’re practically the last of us. What they did to us was monstrous. They made me a monster. They turned your... *our* sister, Kali, into an assassin, consumed with vengeance. Don’t let that happen to you.”

This time, Steven grabbed ahold of Jane’s hand. “You did what had to be done today, but no more. It’s over. When you leave this place, leave it behind for good. Leave the hate, leave the anger, leave the death. Leave it all here. Okay?”

Jane stared baked into Steven’s barely-blue eyes. The vibrant color which once filled her with fear was now tremendously missed.

“Yes, I will. I *promise*,” Jane replied, using the most powerful word she knew. “I won’t ever come back. I won’t try to find more bad men.”

“Good,” Steven said as his eyes fluttered. “C’mere, come closer.” He gestured with his other hand for Jane to lower her face to his.

Mike tensed up for a second but realized Steven was only trying to whisper in El’s ear. He couldn’t hear what was being said, but it looked hurried and serious. Her head was turned away from his and she nodded several times during the muffled conversation.

Jane raised her head and walked to the other side of the table. Mike watched as she bent down and grabbed the device that Steven had used to turn off the lights. She placed it onto the table and gave Steven’s hand a final squeeze.

“Goodbye, Steven,” said Jane.

“Goodbye, Jane,” said Steven.

And then she was backing away from him. They’re eyes stayed locked together. Unwavering. Unblinking.

Mike was already at the hole, ready to assist her. One final moment

of eye contact. And then it was broken. And then she was gone.

And then he was alone.

Until he wasn't.

"C'mon, let's go!" Dustin whispered a little too loudly as the others trailed behind him. None of them could believe how fast their habitually lethargic friend was moving. Mike and Max were helping to support Lucas as El moved alongside them like a bodyguard.

They reached the end of the series of rooms fairly quickly. Before Dustin could utter a single word, the locked door swung open and the Party dashed through the opening.

"Shit, now where?" Dustin asked no one in particular as he scanned the dimly lit space. It was smaller than the other rooms but far more cluttered. Stacks of boxes lined the walls to either side of them. There were no windows or doors.

"Is this the right place?" Lucas asked as he leaned onto Max a bit more.

"Of course it is!" Dustin replied far too quickly to hide his hesitation. "I mean, it has to be, right?"

"Wait, look!" Mike gasped as he pointed at the base of the wall in front of them. The concrete blocks all looked the same except for one at the very bottom. Dustin clicked on the flashlight he had grabbed from his bag and illuminated the spot.

It was a single streak. It could've easily been left by any number of things, but no one in that room had any doubt as to what it really was.

"Blood," Dustin mumbled as he looked over at El. "I think he means

this is the way out, El.”

El stared at the wall and inhaled deeply before raising her arm. She could feel warm blood leaving her nose as the wall crumbled apart. None of others made a sound until all the blocks had been ripped apart.

“It’s the stairwell!” Mike exclaimed. “C’mon, let’s go. Dustin, lead with the flashlight.”

Down and down the Party traveled through the darkness. The light from Dustin’s handheld beacon guided their journey. Mike and Max were surprised at how easy it was to move Lucas down the steps. El was not.

There was an explosion somewhere above them. It was muted but they still heard the distinctive sound. Their hearts beat faster. Their steps quickened.

They were on the first floor again, racing towards the front entrance when the lights turned back on. There, in the distance, was the propped-open door of the lobby.

“We’re almost there!” Dustin yelled, no longer concerned about the volume of his voice. “We’re gonna make it out alive!”

Mike looked over at El and studied her expressionless face. There were tears running down her cheeks. He didn’t say a word.

They burst into the lobby, raced across the tile floor and passed by El’s discarded pile of winter clothing. The doors were right there. There was nothing left to stop them. They could feel the cold air biting at their flesh.

The explosions were deafening.

“JESUS CHRIST!” Hopper screamed as the top left-side of the building in front of him exploded.

More explosions followed along the top floor, each one just as ferocious and thunderous. One after the other until the entire floor was engulfed in a firestorm.

“NOOO!” Joyce yelled as she picked herself off the ground. The shock and sheer force of the explosions had knocked her over. “They could still be in there!”

And then the blasts began again on the next level down. Room by room and piece by piece, the entire facility was being torn asunder from within.

Hopper didn’t wait to hear or see anything else. His only thought was to run. And so, he did. He ran. And he ran. And then he stopped.

And what Jim Hopper saw next left him speechless. He would never forget the scene in front of him. He would think about it every day for rest of his life. The tears did little to warm his freezing face. He started running again.

“I’M COMING!” Hop screamed as he finally found his voice.

It took only another few seconds for the frantic man to reach his destination. Hopper was completely ignoring the unrelenting and resounding detonations in front of him. His sole focus was on the girl sprinting towards him. And the bodies suspended in midair by her side.

Four bodies to be exact.

I miss you more than you anything.

Seven watched as Eleven’s legs and finally her boot-covered feet

disappeared from view. He was left all alone in the room once again. He had spent much of the last few years alone. But this time was different. He felt a terrible emptiness inside of him.

It's because you're dying, you idiot, Seven's subconscious stated with disdain.

He reached over and grabbed the device Eleven had left for him on the table. It was the controller he had used to switch the building lights on and off earlier that evening. The construction of it had taken a lot of work. And he had spent days upon days running wire throughout the entire facility. It was hard work but he had enjoyed every second of it.

You are so special.

The explosives had been stolen from a working quarry. By impersonating the foreman, Seven was able to gain access to the storeroom. All he had to do then was carry the sticks of dynamite out a few at a time. One hot-wired van later and he was back on the road to Hawkins.

You have the prettiest smile.

Seven thought about the last few weeks as the sound of a detonating breaching charge filled his ears. The lock on the door was finally penetrated, but the men clearly hadn't expected a further barrier to entry. He smiled as he heard them curse in anger.

Do they really think everyone is still just sitting in here? He thought to himself. *Idiots...*

Seven could feel the life slipping away from his body. He did not give in to fear. Instead, he reflected on the beauty of the color brown.

Your eyes are enchanting.

The next explosion blew apart the entirety of the door along with the makeshift barricade. He knew that as soon as the dust settled, they'd be inside. And then he'd be dead.

It's about time, Seven mused as he clicked one of the buttons on the

controller. *Shit, I forgot to turn on the lights for them...*

There was a piece of black electrical tape covering a switch at the bottom of the device. Seven tugged at the side of it and peeled off the sticky covering. He had been waiting to do that for a long time.

Everything I did was for you.

“Seven!” Col. Maddox screamed as he and Lt. Harris burst into the run room with guns drawn. “Where are they!? Where’s Eleven!?”

They can’t hurt you anymore.

Subject Seven studied the furious soldiers who had disregarded his warning and continued on their futile crusade. They could have walked away but their anger and hatred betrayed them.

It’s time to leave.

He flicked the switch. He almost pitied them.

I’ll find you in the darkness.

“My. Name. Is. **Steven.**”

I love you, Steven.

Almost.

To say El felt excited to see her adopted father would’ve been the understatement of the century. Before she could utter a single word, the burly police chief pulled her into a hug so tight that it took her breath away.

“WHOA!”

“OWWW!”

“SHIT!”

“GAAH! MY LEG!”

El's lapse in concentration led to her four friends falling to ground in a giant heap. When the explosions began, she didn't hesitate in her action. The shock of the blast had caused Mike, Lucas and Max to trip and fall. Dustin had immediately run over to help as El focused her eyes on her friends.

And then they were floating. Lucas, Max, Dustin and Mike. All together. There were yelps and shrieks but El didn't listen to their protests. The only thing that mattered to her was their safety. With a turn of her head, the group soared out of the building as El raced by their side.

But now, everyone was back on solid ground. Very solid ground.

“What the Hell were you thinking coming here by yourself?” Hop asked as he continued to embrace the girl. He then lifted his head up and glared at the snow-covered kids trying to untangle themselves from each other. “And as for the rest of you...”

“Dad!” The word flew out of El's mouth before she even realized it. The very sound of it made her heart flutter but she didn't take let up. “We need to get them safe. Now!”

Hopper's eyes went wide and his mouth went dry as his brain tried to process what he just heard.

*Did she just call me **Dad!**?* His mind went blank.

“Jim!” Joyce called out as she finally reached the group. “You heard her, let's get them out of here!”

Hopper snapped back to reality as he looked down at El one final time before releasing her and rushing over to the group who had finally risen to their feet. He could tell from how Lucas was being propped up that he was injured.

“It's alright kid, I got you,” he huffed as he picked up Lucas in one swoop. “Alright, let's go!” Hop yelled at the others.

As the explosions continued to rock the building, the group made their way back down the driveway. Once at the guard shack, El turned back to her former home.

Subject Eleven watched as the final blasts decimated the first floor of the Hawkins National Laboratory. And then she heard the loud groan of bending steel and the crumbling of concrete as the entire facility collapsed into itself. Thick, black smoke began rising from the mountain of debris left behind.

El didn't attempt to hold back new tears. The evil contained within the woods was finally extinguished. She was safe. Her friends were safe. The bad men were gone. Steven was...

She fell to her knees and sobbed as Mike ran up to her and put his arms around her. Dustin followed suit. Then Max. Then even Lucas, who had managed to wrangle himself free from Hopper's grasp, joined in.

El's tears were quickly accompanied by ones from her friends. Hopper looked in with exasperation as Joyce put an arm around his waist to prevent him from interrupting the group.

"Is it finally over?" Joyce asked in whisper.

"It damn well fucking better be," Hopper gruffly replied before looking down at Joyce. He met her eyes and he couldn't help but think about how pretty they were.

Such a nice shade of brown...

The rest of the week seemed to fly by. Once again, Hawkins, Indiana was the topic of conversation on national news networks. The masses were shocked to learn that there had been yet another incident involving the same government facility deep in the woods of that quaint, American city.

Jim Hopper, as Chief of Police, was forced to answer far more questions than he liked. Luckily, the Federal Government was quick to blame the destruction on a gas leak. It was reported that an entire team of inspectors, along with a top scientist from the Department of Energy sent to finalize the decommissioning of the facility, were all tragically killed as a result of the dreadful accident.

El was forbidden from watching the news that week, but Hopper knew she did anyway. He was forced to leave her alone in the cabin for extended periods of time and had realized long ago that she was a persistent rule breaker. Mike and his friends, and even Joyce, had pleaded with him to let El stay elsewhere but he didn't acquiesce. No matter what they said about the incident, Hopper was still furious that they had taken off on their own.

He only relented to a visit, albeit a brief one, on Christmas.

Christmas morning arrived and Michael Wheeler was happier than he had been in weeks. Yes, he was excited for the presents he received from his parents and even Nancy – a pretty sweet Mirage Transformers toy – but there was something even better about that day: He was going to see El.

Mike had elicited the help of everyone possible to convince the Chief to let him see El on her very first Christmas: Dustin, Lucas, Max, Nancy and all of the Byers. But at the end of the day, it was Joyce Byers who was most influential.

“You are not going to keep that girl locked up in a cold cabin in the middle of the woods on Christmas!” Joyce scolded Hopper during a visit to the police station. The chief was hiding in his office to avoid the mobs of reports still lurking around.

“She is not going to be alone!” Hopper had fired back. “I have the entire day off. I'll be with her the whole time, alright?”

“Do you really think that's what she wants?” Joyce asked. “A grumpy, old, grinch who's just going to sit on the couch all day and put on old movies and fall asleep?”

“I'm not grumpy!” Hopper said as his mouth cracked into a smile.

"And you gotta admit, that does sound like a nice day..."

"Jim!" Joyce snapped as she pointed her finger her old friend. "I know you can't let her see everyone, but you are going to let Mike visit her. And that's final!" She added before Hop could say another word.

Hopper looked at the woman standing above him and saw the fire in her eyes. He knew when to pick his battles and when to concede defeat. This was the latter.

"Alright, alright!" He finally said as he rubbed his eyes with his right hand. "The damn kid can come over for an hour and then right back home! This isn't going to be a Goddamn play date."

Joyce simply smiled. She knew Hop was going to give in to her. He always did.

Mike's legs were shaking involuntarily in the passenger seat as Jonathan drove the car. Nancy was still forbidden from driving after the accident and Mike's parents had reluctantly allowed Jonathan to drive Mike over to visit Will. It was lie, of course, but what else could he have told them?

I want to go visit my friend Eleven whose real name is Jane but we call her El who totally has superpowers and lives in this cabin in the woods that Chief Hopper owns and he's kinda like her Dad now and I'll be back before dinner but I really want to see her because it's Christmas and I have a present for her and... and...

Mike felt mildly annoyed that even his subconscious rambled on and on. He looked down at the decently wrapped package sitting on his lap. He hoped that she liked the gift he had bought for her.

"Calm down, buddy," Jonathan chuckled as he peered over at the trembling boy. "You remember that you've met her before, right?"

“Huh?” Mike said as he looked up in confusion. “Oh, uhh... well yea, but I mean... it’s been a few days and uhh... it’s her first Christmas you know... and...”

“You’re going to be fine,” Jonathan said as smiled widely. “And she’s going to love your gift, no matter what it is, because it’s from you.”

Mike blushed instantly and turned his head back towards the present. He hoped the sweat from his palms wasn’t going to mess up the wrapping paper.

“I hope so,” he quietly replied.

The pair rode in relative silence after that until the car turned off the main road and the cabin came into view.

“Alright, here we are,” Jonathan said as he pulled up to Hopper’s police SUV. “I’ll be back to get you at 4 o’clock, okay? No later than that.”

“Y-yea, s-sounds good,” Mike stuttered as he looked out into the woods. With a final nod from Jonathan, the young boy exited the car and began walking up the path. As the cabin came into view, Mike could see the plume of smoke exiting the chimney.

It better be warmer in there than it is out here, he thought as the sound of his chattering teeth disturbed the silence of the woods.

Mike climbed the steps and took a deep breath before raising his hand to knock. His hand moved forward but hit nothing but empty air as the door flew open.

And there she was.

“El!” Mike gasped as his eyes danced over her. She was wearing a fuzzy red shirt sweater and green pajama pants with snowmen on them. Her feet were covered in candy cane socks and her hair...

Her hair! Mike whined in silence as he stared at it in wonder.

It was still curly, but pulled back a bit with a pretty red bow near the top of her head holding it all in place. He couldn’t believe how

incredible she looked.

“Mike!” El squealed as she threw himself at him.

Mike deftly moved the present to his side as they embraced. He wasn’t sure who was squeezing harder.

“I missed you, Mike!” El said as she buried her head into his shoulder. “You smell really nice,” she added as she breathed in deeply.

Mike flushed even more as he stumbled to form a complete sentence. “I... thank you... I missed you too and umm... you... you also smell nice.”

El giggled as she pulled away from the boy she cared for so dearly. “Come inside Mike. It’s Christmas!”

El showed Mike all of the decorations she and Hop put up, including a freshly cut Christmas tree adorned with whatever Joyce had been able to lend them and Hop had pulled out of storage.

“He bought lights too!” She said as she pointed at the tree.

Mike couldn’t help but notice that El seemed to hesitate for a moment before walking over to the tree and flicking a switch. The tree immediately burst into a dazzling display of colors as El returned to Mike’s side and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“It’s so pretty,” El whispered.

You’re so pretty, Mike thought.

“Ahem,” Hopper said, as if clearing his throat. He had been in the bathroom when Mike arrived and was just now returning to the living room. “No funny business you two.”

Mike sprang away from El as if he was being electrocuted by her touch.

“Dad!” El snapped as she feigned anger. “Be nice to Mike! It’s Christmas.”

Hopper couldn't help but chuckle as he walked over to Mike, who still seemed shaken by the sudden appearance of the large man.

"Merry Christmas kid," Hop said as he held out his right hand.

With just a hint of hesitation, Mike held out his as well and they enjoyed a semi-awkward handshake with the police chief.

"Merry Christmas," Mike replied with a smile as Hopper squeezed his hand far too hard before releasing it a moment later.

"Alright, that's enough of that," Hop said as he wandered into the kitchen. "Don't you two have presents to exchange or something like that?"

El gasped as she looked down at the package in Mike's hand. "Is... is that for me?"

"Wha...? OH! Yes, a present!" Mike replied with a fluctuating degree of volume in his voice. "I... hope you like it," he added as he handed it to her with a smile.

El took the package with one hand and then pulled Mike over to the couch with her other one. Working very slowly, El carefully unwrapped the present as if was the most precious object in the universe. As the paper fell away, a smallish brown box was revealed.

She shot a quick glance at Mike, who was sitting by her side, before she lifting the lid. She parted the white tissue paper and was greeted by something pink. And fuzzy. Something pink and fuzzy.

El reached inside the box and took the item out with trembling hands. It was a beautiful new winter hat. It felt soft and warm and had a cute little white puffball on the top. El began breathing faster and faster as her eyes watered up.

Mike observed her reaction and all the color drained from his face in an instant. "El, are you alright?" He asked in a mild panic. "I... I know that you lost the hat that Mrs. Byers made for you and I... I saw this one in a store with Nancy and I thought of you and I thought that maybe you'd like another one but..."

"Mike..." El whispered

"I'm sure it reminds you of what happened and... and I'm sorry, it's so stupid. I'm stupid... I'm..."

"Mike," El said again as she turned to the scared looking boy with floppy black hair and cute freckles. "It's beautiful. I love it."

"Y-you do?" Mike asked as he gaped at her. He felt his heart skip a beat.

"Yes, I do," El said with a twinkle in her eye.

She quickly looked over at Hopper who was watching them from the kitchen. No words were spoken between father and adopted daughter, but Hopper understood what she meant. He turned around and occupied himself by thinking of ways to scare Mike in the future.

El's eyes fell back onto Mike as she leaned in closer to him. "It's perfect. It'll keep me warm when you're not with me."

Mike's eyes went wide as the distance between their faces became less and less by the second.

"Merry Christmas, Mike," El whispered as she closed her eyes and leaned in.

"Merry Christm...mmm," Mike replied as his lips met hers and all the troubles of the world faded away.

The kiss was brief but nonetheless wondrous. El's smile was wider than he had ever seen it as she drew away from him. Mike was still in a stupor as he stared back at her.

"I... uhh... I'm glad you like the hat," he said at last.

El looked down at the pretty piece of clothing in her hands once again and her smile quickly faded. She thought about the boy with the bright blue eyes. Subject Seven. Steven. Her brother.

"We have these powers but the more we use them, the faster we die..."

Steven had whispered to her.

"I wish he was still here," she said as she ran her fingers over the cotton. "I wish he wasn't gone..."

"After tonight, you need to stop. You need to stop using them if you want to survive..."

Mike knew who she was talking about. Even though Steven had caused so much trouble, Mike had forgiven his actions. He could never understand the pain and suffering the test subject had endured, but he would always remember the sacrifice Steven had made for them. And especially her.

"Enjoy your life, Jane. Love your family. Love your friends. Love living..."

"We weren't there... at the end, I mean," Mike said as he hoped to lift El's spirits just a bit. After all, it was Christmas. "Maybe... maybe he got out in time."

"Don't feel sad for me. I'm finally going to be with her. Forever..."

"You really think so?" El asked as a tear escaped her eyes. She turned her head away from Mike so he wouldn't see her cry.

Her eyes are still just as pretty when she's sad, was the thought that filled Mike's mind.

Mike placed a hand on El's shoulder and squeezed. She turned towards him again and he gently wiped the tear from her face with his finger. She could feel the love emanating from his touch.

"And someday, we'll all be together. Our brothers. Our sisters. Our whole family..."

El smiled again as she embraced Mike in yet another warm hug. So much had happened over the last year. There had been so much pain and sadness and anger but also kindness and joy and love. And through all of it, they had survived. And Mike was there now, along with her father. And she would see her friends again soon. And then they would all be together at last.

"This isn't a goodbye, Jane. It's a promise to see each other again. Take care of yourself, sis..."

"I don't know El, I really don't," Mike replied tenderly as he caressed the back of the person he loved more than anything in the world. "But you know what? Stranger things have happened."

The End.

Notes for the Chapter:

Aaaaaaannnnndddd it's over!!! A monster of a chapter to finish off my first fan fic. It has been quite a journey over the last six (I can't believe it's been six...) months. I learned a lot about writing a story like this and definitely know how to improve going forward. You really, really, really need to map out the story before you just dive in. I feel like the first half of this story is completely different than the second. (First half isn't as good either... but hey, my first one!)

I'm planning on going back over the entire story to edit it. I'm sure there are mistakes and typos and I just need to format the first few chapters better and fix a few things. I may even add some sentences in here and there. We'll see. "Eleven Deadly Sins" 2.0 will be out sometime in the future ha. I won't post the story all over again, but if you go back and re-read this in a month or few, I'm sure you'll see some differences.

I really hope everyone who reads this (the few of you that do...) enjoy this final chapter. And yes, I get that I'm not even the 100th person to use the whole

'stranger things have happened' line, but I don't care! I was actually planning on one final scene for a long time but I like how it just ends there and there's really no need for another few hundred words. And I just need to post this chapter now because I keep going back and editing more! Gaaah!

I'm sure I'll write more in the future. Interesting fact for everyone to think about: The first Harry Potter book was about 77k words. This story is about 75k (you beat me this time J.K Rowling!) but so many stories on here are 100k, 150k, even 300k words. That's insanity! People are writing full on novels. Blows my mind. Alright, I'm gonna go rest my eyes. Bye!